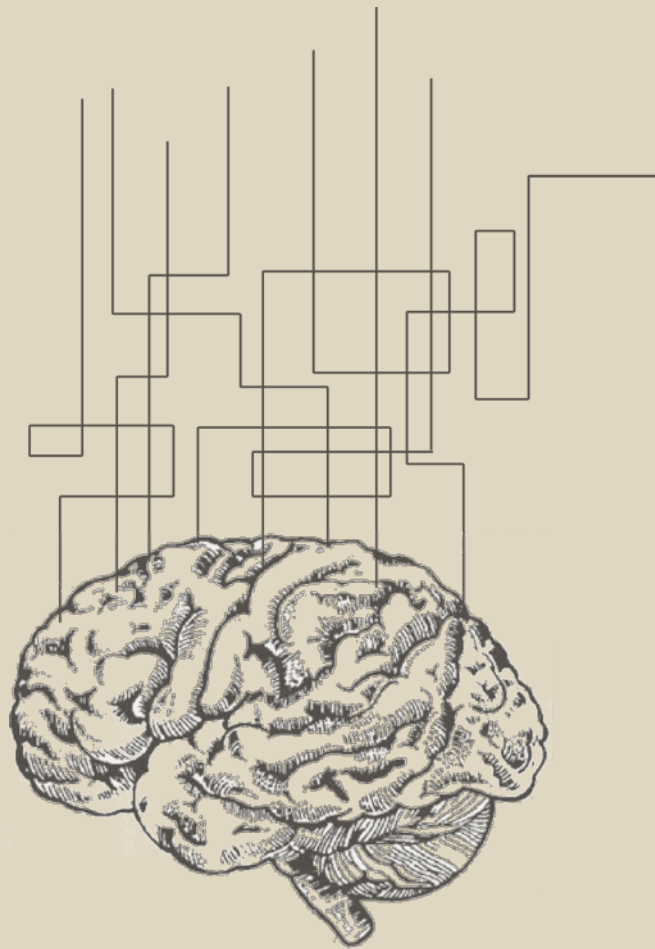


# *The Economics of Attention*

*Richard Lanham*

*David Merkoski*

*Moderated by Marty Kaplan*



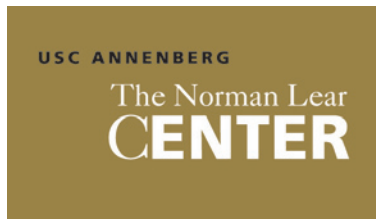
USC ANNENBERG

The Norman Lear  
**CENTER**

USC Annenberg School for Communication  
Norman Lear Center  
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### The Norman Lear Center

The Norman Lear Center is a multidisciplinary research and public policy center exploring implications of the convergence of entertainment, commerce, and society. From its base in the USC Annenberg School for Communication, the Lear Center builds bridges between eleven schools whose faculty study aspects of entertainment, media, and culture. Beyond campus, it bridges the gap between the entertainment industry and academia, and between them and the public. For more information, please visit [www.learcenter.org](http://www.learcenter.org).



### frog design

The frog Design Mind speaker series is an effort to bring together today's leaders in business, technology, and design for an evening of discussion and debate. The series features prominent speakers from design, fashion, media, architecture, sports, academia and business, sharing their perspectives on market trends, cultural innovations, and more. For more information about frog design, visit [www.frogdesign.com](http://www.frogdesign.com).



### Participant Bios

#### **Martin Kaplan**

Martin Kaplan, director of the Norman Lear Center, also holds the Norman Lear Chair in Entertainment, Media, and Society at the USC Annenberg School for Communication. He graduated from Harvard College, received a First in English from Cambridge University in England, and received a Ph.D. in modern thought and literature from Stanford University. He was chief speechwriter to Vice President Walter F. Mondale and is a regular commentator on NPR's *All Things Considered* and on CBS *Morning News*. He was recruited by Jeffrey Katzenberg and Michael Eisner, and worked for them at Disney for 12 years. Kaplan wrote and executive produced *The Distinguished Gentleman* and adapted *Noises Off* for the screen. His articles have appeared in publications including *The New York Times*, *The Washington Post*, *The Los Angeles Times*, *Time*, *U.S. News & World Report*, *The American Scholar*, *The Woodrow Wilson Quarterly* and *The New Republic*. At USC he has taught graduate and undergraduate courses.

#### **Richard Lanham**

Richard A. Lanham is Professor Emeritus of English at UCLA. His most recent book, *The Economics of Attention: Style and Substance in the Age of Information*, was published in 2006 by the University of Chicago Press.

#### **David Merkoski**

David Merkoski, Creative Director at frog design, has twelve years of experience designing successful digital products across a range of mediums including desktop software, television, embedded devices, web applications, websites and installations. His work synchronizes user needs with business strategy through the creative direction and execution of visual, interactive, and motion design. Merkoski focuses on emerging and disruptive technologies in order to provide strategic opportunities and innovative solutions for clients. He has designed and conceptualized user experiences for MTV Networks, CBS Corporation, NBC/Universal, ABC Networks, Microsoft, Motorola, Columbia University, OpenTV, and The Rock and Roll Hall of Fame. He graduated with a BFA from NYU's Tisch School of the Arts Film and Television program. Merkoski has published and lectured on design throughout the interactive design community and has taught courses at NYU Interactive Telecommunications Program, NYU Center for Advanced Digital Arts, and the School of Visual Arts in New York City.

## The Economics of Attention

*Politicians, journalists, marketers, the entertainment industry, even educators and the clergy: everyone wants our attention. Increasingly, attention is considered to be a form of capital. Some economists argue that attention in fact constitutes a parallel economy run on a virtual currency. The USC Annenberg School's Norman Lear Center and frog design joined forces to sponsor an informal panel that took a cross-disciplinary look at how attention works. The panelists examined how shrinking attention-spans and the commoditization of attention shape our culture for good and for ill; how the attention economy is informing new business models in advertising, media, and design; and how the imperative to grab and hold attention is as old as communication itself.*

*If you ask what entertainment is – look at the root of the word – it means to grab or hold onto something. What is it that entertainment grabs and holds onto? Well, it's our attention.*

KAPLAN

**Marty Kaplan:** I invite those of you who would rather not spill mayonnaise on your laps to come sit at the table. These seats are available. So you may be shy, or you've got excellent coordination, but thank you. Excellent. Excellent. Anyone else like to take up the opportunity? Good work.

**Richard A. Lanham:** You will be asked to speak if you sit at the table.

**Marty Kaplan:** Yes, all right. Well, I encourage you to encourage newcomers to come sit at the table as they move past the food station.

Welcome. Thank you for coming. I've been really looking forward to this for quite awhile. My name is Marty Kaplan. I'm the Director of the Norman Lear Center here at the USC Annenberg School. And for those of you who don't know the Lear Center or just have heard of it, our mission is to study the impact of entertainment on society, and not just study it, but in some cases to intervene in the process – to understand its upsides and downsides.

And when we talk about entertainment, we don't just mean what a Wall Street analyst might say entertainment is – that is, a sector with television, movies, music, sports and so on. But instead, what we mean is something far more broad.

If you ask what entertainment is – look at the root of the word – it



MARTY KAPLAN, DIRECTOR,  
USC NORMAN LEAR CENTER



means to grab or hold onto something. What is it that entertainment grabs and holds onto? Well, it's our attention. And if you look at entertainment that way – the art of grabbing and holding onto attention – you can then see a way in which, for example – what politicians are doing, or journalists are doing, or educators are desperately trying to do, and on and on through field after field, is to grab and hold, and in many cases to monetize, our attention.

So that's the arena that we're in; that's the thing we're exploring. And today is what I hope will be just the first of a series of explorations of attention, and the attention economy – more about that shortly.

Today's event is produced in partnership with an international firm called frog design. And there are a number of people here from frog, which locally is based in the Bay Area. And we're doing an exciting project with frog in addition to events like this. And toward the end of our conversation today, I'm hoping we'll be able to do a demo of one thing that we're up to in the virtual world called Second Life.

So ideally, we'll have this conversation lasting until close to 1:00, and then at that point continue on, for those of you who can stay to see the demonstration of what we're up to. And you'll hear a bit about the collaboration we have with frog, and what it's about.

Tim, where are you? Raise your hand – Tim Leberecht from frog design is here. And he and Johanna Blakley from the Lear Center are going to be our non-virtual sure foos, taking us through it.

To have our conversation today, we thought in the spirit of play, which is one of the motives for entertainment, we would ask a couple of people who are from very different realms and try, from that difference, to get some excitement through juxtaposition, which is one of the ways in which nonlinear thinking often gets its energy and momentum.

And so, we have – I'll introduce them to you first, and then we'll launch our conversation. And after a bit, we'll open the conversation to include you, and see where it all goes. We have – I'll just start on my farther left – politics to be determined – with David Merkoski – Merkoski, did I say it right?



**David Merkoski:** Did.

**Marty Kaplan:** Okay. David is Creative Director at frog design. And so what he does at frog is design things, and digital things – the look of them, the feel of them, the way they work, the way users interact with them. And the kinds of clients that he and his team have worked with at frog include brand names, like NBC, CBS, ABC, MTV, Microsoft, Motorola, et cetera, that all of us, whether we like it or not, have interacted with. And I have often thought that if I had a chance for another one or 1.5 careers, being a designer the way David is would be something that I would love to do.

So it's a great pleasure to welcome not a pretender like myself, but a real-world guy. So please join me in welcoming David Merkoski.

In addition, if you have to ask who wrote the book on the attention economy, the economics of attention – well, if you're asking that about the realm of communication, which is what the Annenberg School is about – and in communication, we range from the traditional disciplines of rhetoric to the current cutting-edge digital communication – the person who comes to mind is Richard Lanham, who is an emeritus professor of English at the school that dare not be named here.

And he has, among many other books that he's written – is this your most recent book?

**Richard Lanham:** Yes.

**Marty Kaplan:** Okay. So his most recent book, which I highly recommend, is called *The Economics of Attention: Style and Substance in the Age of Information*. And I thought it would be great to juxtapose someone whose study encompasses several millennia, and the disciplines of rhetoric and speech in communication, with someone who is trying to reach a gazillion people in the audience, and to help the clients monetize it and give the audience a good time; and somehow, in the midst of all that, explore what the nature of attention is.

Please join me in welcoming Richard Lanham.



DAVID MERKOSKI, CREATIVE  
DIRECTOR, FROG DESIGN



PROFESSOR RICHARD LANHAM



I want to start by asking both of you – you, Richard, from your perspective in rhetoric; and you, David, from your perspective in design – what is it that grabs people’s attention? What are the techniques, the disciplines, the push-buttons, the things that you can count on?

I mean, I’ll pick one example from the world of design, which is when you go to Toys R Us, the aisles that are supposed to attract nine-year-old boys to get their parents to buy them something – everything is, you know, neon green and purple. And the aisles with girls are pink and purple, and et cetera. And from the realm of rhetoric, there are certainly things that people tend to say and do in order to try to get their listeners’ attention.

So first that general question, and maybe we’ll drill down and sum it. But Richard, you want to start?

**Richard Lanham:** Okay.

I really feel like an outsider in this group. I’ve spent most of my life teaching medieval and renaissance literature, and Greek and Latin literature a little bit, too.

I stumbled into the two subjects of this book. I know it’s unbecoming to try to flack your book, but it was born in such an odd way that I think it is relevant for this – and then I will get to rhetoric, which you might think of as, historically, the economics of attention, at least as it was taught for a couple thousand years.

I got into the digital world because I went to a SIGGRAPH meeting. You guys are so knowledgeable, you all know what SIGGRAPH is (Special Interest Group on Graphics and Interactive Techniques). If this were an English department, I would have to explain what it is. I went to one of the early ones, and I saw a simulation of carrier landings – fighter plane landing on a carrier. And it took me – it really was an epiphany – it took me about a minute or two to say, Uh-oh, this changes everything for fixed text, and everything that I’ve spent my life studying.

And things like this don’t – as I reflected – don’t come along every day. The last one was the Gutenberg revolution, but really the last one was what medieval scribes did about the year 1000, when they started leaving space





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LANHAM



between words, and modern punctuation was invented.

And I thought, these things only come along once every 400 or 500 years; it would be a pity to miss it, just because it was none of my business. And so I started stumbling around in it, and wrote a book called *The Electronic World*, and then I wrote this book. So that's how I got into the digital world.

And I don't know exactly – I have two explanations for how I started hanging around with economists. The front stage one is that I was interested in self-organizing, complex adaptive systems. I have a big picture on my office wall that was painted by an algorithm, or series of algorithms and interferences by the artist.

And I soon noticed – no big intellectual accomplishment, this – that the most interesting and obvious – the most egregious example of a self-organizing, complex adaptive system was a market. And so I started getting interested in markets.

And then it gradually dawned on me that what rhetoric was – had been for 2,000 and a half years – is really an economics of attention. It's really the price system for the free market of ideas. You all – maybe you all won't know – that Frederick Hayek's – a great economist, a free-market economist – insight, or one of them, was that the price system is finally an information system; that it's really all about the kinds of things that you all are interested in. And it struck me that rhetoric was really the price system for the marketplace of ideas. And that's how I decided to write about this subject.

**Marty Kaplan:** In this book, you begin by pointing out that in an information age, such as we're in, there is no lack of information. The scarce commodity is attention.

**Richard Lanham:** That's what I – that's where I start. I should say – I'm sure I don't need to say it for you, but maybe I do – the word "rhetoric" has not always been a synonym for bullshit.

*[Laughter.]*

*What is it that grabs people's attention? Well, that's what the history of rhetoric is all about – about verbal patterns that grab people's attention, about various kinds of styles that grab people's attention.*

LANHAM



**Marty Kaplan:** Or politics, for that matter.

**Richard Lanham:** Well, with which it is intimately related for most of Western history, at least since the Greeks took over the Phoenician alphabet. It has been the basis of Western education in the word. And philosophers may have won the debate, but in fact, the history of Western education is the history of rhetoric for 2,000 years. This didn't really fade out until certainly the middle of the 18th Century, and in some cases not until the beginning of the 19th.

So when you're talking about the history of rhetoric, you're talking about the history of Western expression and notation. So I felt a little more at home in this way, because I thought I knew something about this.

As far as what the book says, it starts, just as you heard, with the idea that – I have some neat quotations – I'm not trying to steal your time, okay? I know you've got interesting things to say – this would be changed. When you ask what happened, economics is traditionally defined as the allocation of scarce commodities which have alternate uses. If you think about this as the information society – I've got a nice quotation I use in the book from Peter Drucker – "you realize that information is not in short supply; we're drowning in it. What's in short supply is the attention that makes sense of it."

If you then say what is it that grabs people's attention? It's what you do for a living – it's this wonderful device that I don't own yet, because I don't have anything to say on cell phones. Sometimes I walk across the campus like this. And just so that I won't feel so lonesome, I scratch my ear –

*[Laughter.]*

**Richard Lanham:** – so that people will think I'm talking on the telephone.

What is it that grabs people's attention? Well, that's what the history of rhetoric is all about – about verbal patterns that grab people's attention, about various kinds of styles that grab people's attention.





*But packaging is inevitable. You can call this, on the one hand, style, which is what it is. You can call it design, which is your business. But it's inevitable. You can't ever etiolate out the packaging.*

LANHAM

In the larger sense, if you think that attention is the necessary intermediary in an economics based on information, then you have to make a fundamental assumption or observation. And that is that information always comes in some kind of package. It always comes in something like this; very rarely in so neat a combination of transparency and opacity that you notice both how useful it is and how beautiful it is.

But packaging is inevitable. You can call this, on the one hand, style, which is what it is. You can call it design, which is your business. But it's inevitable. You can't ever etiolate out the packaging. In the book, one of the questions I ask is, Okay, in an economics of attention, who are the economists? Everyone from movie directors to designers, to poets to artists.

So I have a chapter on Christo and Andy Warhol, not as artists but as economists. It's a lot of fun. Christo started out life as a wrapper – W-R-A-P-P-E-R. And he did a wonderful project in the '80s at McAllister College in Minneapolis, where the class wrapped 100 boxes in plain brown craft paper and tied them with ordinary twine. I'm quoting – "they then mailed them to members of the Walker Art Center's Contemporary Arts Group. Twenty members fell into the trap and unwrapped the box. Inside was a note from Christo – the package you destroyed was wrapped according to my instructions in a limited edition of 100 copies for members of Walker Art Center's Contemporary Arts Group. It was issued to commemorate my '42,390 Cubicfeet Package 1966' at the Minneapolis School of Art."

Well, this is terrific. People opened it and said, My God, I just destroyed a priceless work of art that could have kept one of my kids in college for a semester. It was also the perfect final exam. Because if you opened the box, you flunked the course. And nobody had to grade the exam. It was as simple as that – great moment in pedagogy.

**Marty Kaplan:** Richard, could I – in the interest of – well, not – just to pause –

**Richard Lanham:** Okay.

**Marty Kaplan:** – so that we can braid in a little bit of David, and then make a lanyard out of this?



**Richard Lanham:** Okay, I'm – so that was the kind of thing I bring in this book. And I talk about all kinds of other things.

If any of you wants to read this book and doesn't want to spend too much time on it, read chapter six, which is called, "Barbie and the Teacher of Righteousness." It's about Barbie dolls and the Dead Sea Scrolls.

**Marty Kaplan:** Speaking of juxtapositions.

**Richard Lanham:** There you go. And you can read all about it. And the whole argument of the book is in this chapter, which started out as an article in the Houston Law Review. Okay.

**Marty Kaplan:** So you get to do a wind-up, too.

**David Merkoski:** Thought I was going to go all day back here with no question, and then I'll mirror you all the way on –

**Marty Kaplan:** Okay. Great.

**David Merkoski:** – all the way, ending with Christo.

So, you bring up shelf space, which is a term used in the industrial design sort of industry, to understand how you can get your product in front of people's eyes, right, and bring attention to it. And every year in America, 20,000 new products are put into a supermarket or a big-box store, right? I mean, think about it – 20,000 products everything from types of water to the iPhone. A lot of things for you to process and grock and become aware of. And so there's an attention problem there.

And so, how do they deal with that? Well, there are clever tricks, like where you put it on the shelf – height, in terms of what's grabbable? So in grocery stores, things that they want children to have will actually be closer to the ground, right, than higher up, where parents can grab them – things like that. Ultimately, what you're doing is you're designing attractiveness, right? And that's the measure of how much attention you think you can get out of an individual.



*Ultimately, what you're doing is you're designing attractiveness, right? And that's the measure of how much attention you think you can get out of an individual.*

MERKOSKI



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MERKOSKI



And because you're talking about complex self-organizing systems, let's go back all the way to the very first one – the Eucaryotic form of being a human – long, long time ago, way before Renaissance literature and such. And back then, it was about chemical signatures, right, in the gradient. And that's how we understood – we as Eucaryote – as single, complex-celled organisms – would understand the world around us. We'd actually chase these chemical gradients in the ether that we were swimming around in.

And what's fascinating about that is that that's actually been preserved with us to this very day. Inside of our nose – right around here, in all of your noses – there's an organ, the vomeronasal organ, which basically is responsible for sussing out. It's that sixth sense that we all have about things; our ability to kind of feel the energy of a room, right, when you know it's going wrong, or if someone's not right? That's a sort of a powerful –

**Marty Kaplan:** How are we doing?

*[Laughter.]*

**David Merkoski:** We should all be able to smell that right now.

And what's actually kind of sad is that because we can't perceive it as one of the five senses for attractiveness, we actually disregard it. And in fact, when people get nose jobs, they actually remove that organ as part of the process. It's kind of sad. And I'd love to see a clinical study about those people's lives –

*[Laughter.]*

**David Merkoski:** I mean, maybe they are better; they got a nose job.

But the point is that that kind of chemical signature reading has been with us for a very long time. And we tend to think about it in a more simple, five-senses way, but it's really a much more complex set of analysis that we're doing inside of our brains, to figure out what is attractive to us.

So the look and feel – you mentioned that earlier, right – I mean, something that's very principal to the designer's trade, is coming up with the look of something – which is to say the color or material finish, right, the way the chrome reflects off this, and the matte black, or the polish.

But the feel is becoming increasingly more important. And the feel is really a longitudinal study in the exercise of how a human relates to a product, or in this case, human-computer interaction. And so it's thinking about how the response, the feedback loop, is actually crafted and generated, so that you can create a desired output in the end users. You want them to do something – not just feel something, but do something.



*You have that micro-second of attention for someone to make a split decision about whether they like it or not.*

MERKOSKI

That's very different. Because prior to that, we had the mechanical revolution, we had the ability to pull levers and twist wheels. But the complexity that's able to be embedded inside of products like this is so high because the affordances, the ability – the levers themselves – the things that you could grasp mentally, but also physically – are now buried. They're invisible to you. They're distant from you.

And so we need to design this whole new set of contexts and abstractions that allow us to actually get to those affordances – which is why, to use this device (iPhone) for a second, touch screens are so important. They're direct manipulation. It's one of the best interface paradigms you can possibly bring to the market, because it is – kind of like WYSIWYG – what you see is what you get? It's the same thing for direct manipulation, in the same way I directly manipulate this water bottle [*picks up water bottle*] by grabbing it and twisting it and drinking it.

The problem with software is that we're using all these kind of idiomatic backstops. With scroll bars and tabs and zoom boxes – we're not really addressing any thing. We're actually applying kind of cognitive abstractions to the complexity of what's possible – the function of a device.

And so for that reason, my job as a designer is to find ways to find some interface or physical mechanism that allows you to understand the complexity of the product in a relatively simple way that is – it has an affordance. It has a way to grock it, a way to understand it.

In that sense, I think it's a lot about packaging. Because when you see an object on a shelf, or more and more now, we see something as a single image on a website – whether or not I want that or not – you've got to communicate so much about the contents of that thing, just with that one moment, right? You have that microsecond of attention for someone to make a split decision about whether they like it or not.



*The OOB-E – O-O-B-E – out-of-box experience. And that's basically trying to figure out everything from the shell, the frame of the package, to the actual experience of what it means to open it up and take the pieces out one by one by one.*

MERKOSKI



And that's the economics of attention. And in the attention economy, the most – I think you've been saying this as well – the scarcest supply in the entire value chain is that person's time. It's that microsecond decision they make about to walk on or to actually pick up.

And so design is really two things in one – it's trying to design the package of the objects – the way it's attractive to you, in that kind of pheromone sense, the sort of – hmm, what's the feeling of that product; do I like it – and then once you get it, the actual use of that product.

And so we have terms for that in our industry; it's out-of-box experience, the – what's quickly becoming the OOB-E – O-O-B-E. And that's basically to –

**Marty Kaplan:** Say it again –

**David Merkoski:** The OOB-E – O-O-B-E – out-of-box experience. And that's basically trying to figure out everything from the shell, the frame of the package, to the actual experience of what it means to open it up and take the pieces out one by one by one. There's a ceremonial, almost ritual quality to that that you see online. A lot of people are actually really into this kind of "unboxing," it's called, right? And they'll actually digest in their blogs hundreds of images of every single moment of – opening the Styrofoam out and taking the warranty card out, and unwrapping the twist tie of the plug.

So design is in the details. But it's also the design of the actual object itself. And increasingly what we're finding is that people are paying less and less attention to the design of the object itself, because consumer culture is really about the new; it's the novelty of having the thing.

I thought it was very interesting that you said, "I don't have one of these yet." You will, eventually.

*[Laughter.]*

**David Merkoski:** And you'll have it for three days, and you won't know why you got it, but you have it. And that's kind of this consumptive culture that we're in. And that's fine.

I think to tie it all the way back to Christo, and then I think the "Eternal Golden Braid" is finally there – there was a prank, which is pretty much what Christo was doing was a prank. There was a prank held at CES this year by the guys at Gizmodo. Gizmodo's a gadget blog. And they go to CES. And, it's their job basically to report on what interesting gadgets are coming to the market this year, you know.

*And isn't this kind of a sick circus that we actually participate in, in terms of CES?*

MERKOSKI



And so normally they would just be going around with a reporter's pass and asking the product marketers who are on the floor and what's the new thing – cool. They go back, they write a story about it. But this year, they actually walked around – one of the guys walked around with a device called TV-B-Gone. TV-B-Gone. And he actually held it up to teleprompters and held it up to televisions, and held it up to product demos. And what it did basically is send out the equivalent of an electromechanical pulse, right, sort of a neur-izing ray, that actually just killed the entire screen – whatever was being shown.

So here I am – I'm a product marketer, I'm in the middle of saying, "The iPhone has an amazing –" and all of a sudden, it goes blank. And I have nothing to say, because I can't show you anymore, right? Or someone will be demonstrating a 150-inch LCD television, and it would just go blank, and all you saw was black.

And no one knew why this was happening. All across CES, these screens were dying out. And they finally discovered – because he posted, saying he was doing this, after CES was over. This guy at Gizmodo was going around basically zapping it.

And it reminds me of what you guys do as well, which is to study what's going on in entertainment and media, but also to kind of interject yourself sometime, and sort of wake people up a little bit to that consumptive behavior, in this case to how many gadgets we actually acquire over the course of our time. And isn't this kind of a sick circus that we actually participate in, in terms of CES?





*What is the downside  
in a free market  
attention economy;  
the downside, if any,  
to, say, democracy?*

KAPLAN

I mean, I don't know how many of you have been to CES – Consumer Electronics Show in Las Vegas every year – but it's basically Mecca. It's Mecca for the design industry, right? It's where every new shiny item is put out on the table. And people ooh and they ah, and they take that home, and they build the future out of that.

**Marty Kaplan:** So that's the utopian version, now let's explore what might be a dystopian account of that world. And I'm going to ask the question of Richard. But first I'd like to put just an example or quote on the table to illustrate it.

This comes from a blog yesterday, *LA Observed*, which follows the world of media in Los Angeles. And the author, Kevin Roderick, a former *LA Times* reporter, is talking about the way in which at the *LA Times* website, one of the things that is reported frequently is what stuff gets the most hits on the *LA Times* website. And this in turn, it is said at the newspaper, is very important internally. Because writers who write stories that get lots of hits are thought to be good writers, and other people should do what they do. So there is a listing of all the stuff on the *LA Times*.

But before the list is reprinted, here's what Kevin Roderick says – "It's hard not to notice that the periodic recaps of web performance at *LATimes.com* don't dwell on writing or reporting quality, impact of the journalism or connecting with Los Angeles. It's all about numbers, seemingly. The eyeballs of a teenage boy in Prague looking for tits count the same as a yuppie in Silverlake or a studio executive looking for real news. And the horny kid in Prague is easier to attract – just run paparazzi pics, which scored the most page views in the following rundown emailed to the *LA Times* staff yesterday."

So my question is, with we as human animals, who have appetites for certain kinds of information, certain kinds of packaging; whose desires can be manipulated, what is the downside in a free market attention economy; the downside, if any, to, say, democracy?

*The impatience with politics, the reason we don't like politicians or don't like rhetoricians and whatever, is that we don't like packaging. We want to have a direct connection with the thing itself...*

LANHAM



**Richard Lanham:** Well, this is not a new charge. It was the charge that Plato brought against the sophists. And it's what has given rhetoric a bad name ever since. And it's certainly true that language, or whatever kind of visual language you want to talk about, can be used to mislead – to think that the alternative to that is some perfect communication with the thing itself is the Platonic argument. But it's never worked, because we don't know what the thing itself is like, except through language or image, or whatever. So you are returned to the necessity for some kind of package, to the necessity for your way of life, for your profession.

I spent a lot of time teaching Renaissance sonnet sequences, which I'm sure is something that interests all of you. And the problem with the lover who wants to use the poem to get the lady is that he has to keep saying, I really do love you, in spite of the fact that I'm using the same old language that people have been using for 2,000 years. But I really do believe it. And of course, sometimes it works, and sometimes it doesn't.

But the lover is frustrated not only because he can't get the lady – I'm sorry, there weren't any female sonnets; don't come down on me like a thousand bricks. So, he returned to the necessity for some kind of package. And then he had to become a specialist in packaging. And to be a specialist in packaging is the way every politician tries to get elected, but at the same time to advance whatever agenda he has.

The impatience with politics, the reason we don't like politicians or don't like rhetoricians and whatever, is that we don't like packaging. We want to have a direct connection with the thing itself, but there's no – the only way we can talk about it is –

**Marty Kaplan:** But in a transition from a text packaging to a world in which imagery and other digital marvels are also part of packaging – something which certainly began earlier than the digital revolution; began when the image was mechanically reproduced –

**Richard Lanham:** Sure.

**Marty Kaplan:** – but continues now – is there some qualitative difference in packaging that has an impact on society in this wider repertoire of devices?

**Richard Lanham:** You mean is packaging more villainous now than it used to be? It's about advertising – that it is a great villain – no, I don't think so. There are just very different kinds. And you face the same kind of agony. I'm trying to think of an example, so I don't sound so professorial.

[Laughter.]



*You live in the realm of eye candy, where I would imagine everything you touch is more interesting and desirable to approach, get to know, than all these other things.*

KAPLAN



**Richard Lanham:** Here's this really neat cell phone. Here's my cell phone. Sonneteer has always said, my cell phone is as good as his cell phone. But it manifestly isn't. And the question is then, is this because his packaging is villainous, where mine – I can talk on the telephone just as well as he can? No, I don't think the images are going to be more or less villainous. I've never believed in the villainy of advertising, which is a stock response of humanists. Because I never believed in the villainy of rhetoric; that would be embarrassing, since I've spent my life studying it.

**Marty Kaplan:** Let me try asking David the question –

**Richard Lanham:** Does that make sense?

**Marty Kaplan:** Yes – it does. I'm going to ask it in a slightly different way, which is – there is some kind of information which is difficult, complicated, complex – maybe, God forbid, boring – which is essential, nevertheless, for the functioning of a democracy, a good society, and so on. It takes hard work, it's not accessible, you have to really force yourself through discipline, and so on.

You live in the realm of eye candy, where I would imagine everything you touch is more interesting and desirable to approach, get to know, than all these other things. Do you think there is any disadvantage to a realm of human knowledge or experience which is being driven by the amazing skills which those who do what you do have at their fingertips to deploy?

**David Merkoski:** I'm just kind of sitting here thinking about what it might be like to live in a world of eye candy; it sounds very pleasant. Sounds very Willy Wonka to me. Because, you know, in our world, there is all that hard, annoying work. And the thing again we're trying to do is prevent as much of that from happening as possible.

I would ask, how much of this stuff that we design is in your life, is in all of our lives? There's something materially demonstrated here on this table. And it may be a generational thing; it may not. But how much matter, basically, is constituted here to collect and deliver information, versus how much matter is here?

*There's not an inherent villainy in these things. There's not an evilness, any more so than there is in making books or making coffee cups, right? It's the process of bringing something to life, to market, that actually is useful and usable or desirable.*

MERKOSKI



So yes, there's an eye candy to this. There's a frame, right, that's being designed to be attractive. And I think where that frame ends and begins is getting harder to identify. The white ear buds of the iPod were as much a form of the packaging of the idea of iPod as the actual product that played music, or in your case made a phone call. It was a way to announce that I'm an iPod owner as I walk around the city, and everyone can see my whiteness and go, Oh, he's got that iPod thing.

And so I think you're right, there is a degree of eye candy that's being built out there. But to relegate it all down to eye candy? I mean, I think that's that weird, utopic-dystopic kind of divide that very much is about whether or not you're in it or out of it; whether or not you believe that there's value in the technology itself, or you're fearful of it. You don't understand it, and so you put it at a distance from yourself, right?

And the more that you can entertain the notion and grow with the new mediums and new formats that are being developed in terms of communication, I think the closer you can come to accepting that that technology, that material thing, the eye candy that's being built, is no different from the coffee cup or the sweater. They're all being designed, right, they're all being framed and packaged. It's just a question of how you use it, and what you do with it.

And there's not – I'm going to go right where you are – there's not an inherent villainy in these things. There's not an evilness, any more so than there is in making books or making coffee cups, right? It's the process of bringing something to life, to market, that actually is useful and usable or desirable. And the question is, are we putting too much in the market, forcing that desire, creating perceptual frames where once there were none before?

And I would argue – back to the same point you're making – rhetoric's been doing that forever. And as we up that resolution from text to images to videos to the products, to the things themselves – and maybe later in the virtual world, as we'll see – that all we're doing basically is making it more common, more familiar to ourselves, what that frame of reference is.

So I don't know. I think the familiarity is a good thing – that we're able to design that, that we're able to bring things that are natural to people. Whereas before, we had to interface with text and images that were removed from ourselves. So presenting it in a context that's familiar? To me, that sounds good.



*Once you've done it,  
it's like learning  
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done it, just because  
they haven't done it.*

LANHAM



**Richard Lanham:** I'm not arguing against myself, but I want to make a qualification of what I said. You're really asking, has the multimedia world – color, imagery, movement, sound, compressed into beautifully designed devices – has it somehow increased the range of deception, or contributed to the moral degradation of humankind?

**Marty Kaplan:** Or does it drive out the consumption of stuff?

**Richard Lanham:** Okay. Let me use my book as an example of books [*Picks up book*] and I'm going to use your stage prop [*iPhone*], too, can I do that? What this does that this doesn't is make possible propositional thinking. What happened with notations over history, especially since the leaving of space between words, is to create a medium which is an aesthetic of deprival – no sound, no movement, no color. What it does is empower propositional thinking. It has driven propositional thinking.

I'm conflicted in this area, because propositional thinking is the kind I do; it's the kind I like. I'm confused by images. I don't multitask. I'm at an age where I don't even unitask very well.

[Laughter.]

**Richard Lanham:** But the center of the feeling bookish people have, that the world's going to hell in a handcart, is that this radical focus on the aesthetic of deprival in order to power conceptual thinking – and by that, I mean all of the hard things – that's a real and observable change. What my humanist friends say is that we are therefore losing the Western tradition. That's wrong – the Western tradition has been an expressive signal and notational system which has been as rich as it could possibly be.

But it couldn't move very much, because you don't have the means to move. It used color whenever you could use it. It mixed design and alphabetic notation in the manner that somebody like David Carson does, and whenever it could do it. It just couldn't do it nearly as well as this [*the iPhone*] does it.

The flipside is that what it did it did extremely well. But the reason why there is so much feeling against it is that there are people like me, who have been brought up thinking that the center of the endeavor is to memorize the list of the 75 most common Greek irregular verbs. And that is a very – believe me, I've done it – it's a very difficult thing to do. Once you've done it, it's like learning Chinese. It allows you to look down on people who haven't done it, just because they haven't done it.

But that's a distortion. It's a fundamental distortion, really, of the standard humanistic world, the world it is based on – on books and propositional thought. That is a big change. But it doesn't mean we have repudiated the Western tradition; it means we've gone back to it. The Western tradition of notation really started when the Greeks adopted the Phoenician alphabet and moved from an oral culture to a literate culture. When they did that, then they wanted to put into the realm of literate notation all the things that you can do in a normal way – you wave your hand around, you can talk, you can scream.

And the effort was made to put as much of that as you can in this aesthetic of deprival, but it doesn't really work very well.



So you are really going back to the world, the rich world of what Father Walter Ong calls secondary orality – the rich mixture of oral and literate – that makes again the face of an economics of attention and an economics of physical stuff. And what I argue in this book is that you can't hold it in the mind at once, but you can toggle back and forth between them at different levels of different rates. And that's going to be the central humanistic power – not to deny this world, but to understand how to do it, and also how to preserve the powers of propositional thought in it. That's why I write books about composition in prose style.

If you think that I'm overly optimistic about doing it, I'm not. So it's a real change, but it doesn't necessarily mean that it's all bad, or that it is all new.

**Marty Kaplan:** I'm going to try again to be seamless and flew –

*[Laughter.]*

**Marty Kaplan:** – to ask, if I wanted you to play a DVD, would you be able to?

*[Laughter.]*

**Marty Kaplan:** Before I do, let me explain what this is. Every conversation on this topic should surely involve some degree of interactivity. I'm going to ask you all to participate in an experiment. And it has to do with the nature of attention. Now it's possible in this room that there are some of you who have participated in this experiment before. And you know where it's going. I would ask those of you not to indicate to the room, Oh! You know, that sort of thing. Just please be quiet. And for those of you who have not participated in this before, I would ask you to try your best just to be silent as we go through this, okay?





I'm going to tell you what we're going to do. I'm going to show you a brief clip. And in this brief video clip, it's going to be number one from the third column, okay, but not yet. What's going to happen is you're going to see two groups of people – one wearing white T-shirts, and one group wearing black T-shirts. And they're going to be passing a basketball. What I'd like you to do is to count the number of passes of the basketball between people wearing white T-shirts. Okay?

So try not to be confused by the black T-shirt passing. Count only the number of passes made by the people wearing white T-shirts, okay? Let's do it in silence. And at the end, I'm going to ask you how many passes there were.

*[Video plays.]*

**Marty Kaplan:** Okay? Now, how many here – I'm just going to do a quick survey – how many here think the number was 12? Thirteen? Fourteen? Fifteen? Sixteen? Seventeen?

**Unidentified Speaker:** Depends if you count the last.

**Marty Kaplan:** Okay. Okay. Eighteen? Nineteen? Okay, so we have the range. They seem to be mostly in the 17-18 zone.

Now, I'd like you to play this again, only what I'd now like you all to do is not count the passes. Simply take in the entire scene. Don't try to count anything; simply watch – same video.

*[Video plays.]*

**Marty Kaplan:** Okay. So how many of you did not see the gorilla the first time around? Quite a few. Quite a few.

So that is direct, personal evidence of a phenomenon in cognitive psychology known as inattention blindness; that selective attention, continuous partial attention, oscillating attention, as you described it, multitasking, non-multitasking, all these things really are involved in our own immediate wiring. And so this is not an abstract concept. You can find it all over Google, if you want to try to amaze your friends.

What I'm going to do, David, is – you didn't have a chance to react to Richard's last comment.





*The book is a dominant  
frame of our time...*

MERKOSKI

**David Merkoski:** Oh, I think he said it. Frankly, it was the sum-up of the entire discussion, which is to say we're patterned, we're normalized – whether physiologically or culturally – we're trained to perceive things in certain frames.

And the book is a dominant frame of our time, right? I mean, it's been around for so long, and we know how to use it. And I might challenge the fact that it has no sound, or has no color, or other kind of – you know, I think it's pretty rich as movement, right? I mean, in fact, it's a very, very full-resolution experience, as any kind of object will be.

But what we're getting to, though, I think, and where I fundamentally agree, is this idea that the familiar – back to what I was talking about as well – the familiar is comfortable, and the unfamiliar is not. And so we shouldn't just disparage the unfamiliar, because it's unfamiliar. There's benefit and value in learning and approaching it, and trying to find out how to make it familiar. And that's kind of the hard part, basically trying to understand why it matters anyway – why would I want to use this?

And, again, we don't even perceive that question anymore about books. I'd love to find someone who's never seen a book, and have them – why would I want to use this thing, right? And we all know that now.

So a large part of printing these shiny objects is trying to convince people, but also educate them as to why they need these things. And –

**Marty Kaplan:** You should meet my 15-year-old.

**David Merkoski:** She probably has – he or she probably has them all.

But I think that's the hard part, right? That's where this kind of dystopic notion of technology comes from, a sense that somehow, these things are being pushed at us, and we're forced to consume them. That's no different from books; it's no different from any material product in an economy. I mean, that's what's always been going on over time.

So what I would say, I think, is parroting the same thing that you're saying, which is to recognize that the resolution that this object provides in terms of its storytelling, its narrative capabilities, is much higher than this resolution, though they share ultimately the same kind of constructs of sound, motion, all that kind of stuff – but this is a richer, higher-resolution fidelity of that, and accept them both. Accept them all, right? I mean, you don't have the iPhone yet, but you will. And that's the kind of –

**Marty Kaplan:** And you don't have his book yet.

*[Laughter.]*

**David Merkoski:** I asked for it. You told me go to Amazon and get it.

**Richard Lanham:** Well, I didn't know that I would have a chance to push some product here.

*[Laughter.]*

**Marty Kaplan:** I'm going to ask if anyone has some questions before adding in the other thread, which is the Second Life collaboration we're involved in. Johanna?

**Johanna Blakley:** I know of one that ties indirectly to this last set of comments. And it's just a general question about the value of unfamiliarity in an economy of attention – that newness, the thing that we don't understand, the thing we don't recognize. Sometimes that's the only thing we notice, in a shelf that's got a bunch of crap on it that we've bought a million times before. Oh, this is new.

**Marty Kaplan:** And they –

**Johanna Blakley:** What's this? How does this work?

**Marty Kaplan:** And even the old ones all say "new."

**Johanna Blakley:** Yeah, exactly. So there's that side of it. And also, the power and the attractiveness of things that are supposed to be repulsive, the things that are supposed to push us away. The warning signs sometimes are more visible to us than the invitation-to-enter signs are. So I'm just curious about that sort of warped side of the attention economy, where there seem to be things that we shouldn't be interested in. But we're even more interested perhaps in them than the things that gentle designers like yourself are trying to familiarize us with and trying to make look inviting to us.

**David Merkoski:** Well, there's the intentionality of design in almost everything. So the biohazard symbol, or the neon green – you know, these are things that are supposed to warn us not to do something – they're actually intended to get our attention for good, right? The gentle designer has done his job.

*I'm just curious about that sort of warped side of the attention economy, where there seem to be things that we shouldn't be interested in.*

BLAKLEY



*Jackass: The Movie was an amazing example of blurring that space, where it clearly was intentional upon the part of the actors and directors to create that viscerally disgusting experience, which clearly proved high at the box office.*



*And so our ability to even differentiate the high and the low is getting harder and harder, as the peaks and the valleys become basically the floor itself.*

MERKOSKI



But I think where it's more interesting is – and forgive the reference – kind of like the snuff film side of culture, which is basically YouTube.com. I mean, it's this, just this, God, it's just the dreck, right? I mean, it's just this kind of boiling over of – so it's not something that actually has any innate value from a designed perspective. Yet we're so attracted to people falling off ladders and puncturing themselves with nail guns, right?

These are horrible moments that in some cases have been designed. I think *Jackass: The Movie* was an amazing example of blurring that space, where it clearly was intentional upon the part of the actors and directors to create that viscerally disgusting experience, which clearly proved high at the box office.

So yeah, we do have an innate desire to follow that. This goes back to the gradient, right, the signal in the gradient. It's really about the strength of that gradient. And one of the biggest problems we're having in modern culture, and where I might suggest there is some negativism around what this [iphone] is capable of doing – and not because of the resolution issue – is being able to actually create these moments that break taboos people have held for so long.

What we're seeing in digital culture is the ability to rapidly destroy cultural mores and senses of good faith, and good hygiene, and good – right? I mean, these things are dying before us.

I was thinking about the movie *Alien*, or the movie *Jaws*. For their time, these were extremely scary movies – watching an alien pop out of someone's chest. My God, if you remember that movie, you were just freaking out. Same thing with *Jaws*. But now it's like you expect that on a Super Bowl commercial.

**Marty Kaplan:** It's a spoiler, for any of you who haven't seen it.

*[Laughter.]*

**David Merkoski:** Right, spoiler on that, true.

So, what we've done is basically, we've normalized out any kind of experiential quality of being. That is to say anything from the highest, most disgusting, most visceral experience to the most benign, mundane experience has kind of been flat-lined. And so we've all become somewhat numb as a result of that. And so our ability to even differentiate the high and the low is getting harder and harder, as the peaks and the valleys become basically the floor itself.

**Marty Kaplan:** I have a hunch the Greeks had a view of the high-low distinction.

**Richard Lanham:** Well, yeah. We're hierarchical primates. We've always been more interested in hierarchy than anything else. So you're talking about whether the modern world is going to hell in a handcart. As you get older, the more you will find that this seems more and more likely to be true.

I distrust my own feelings. I hate to be an optimist. People sometimes say when they read my books, "Good God, you're dismal." But, you know, an awful lot of stuff you do is just extremely encouraging, extremely interesting. The unification of beauty and use in something like this [*the iPhone*] is really extraordinary.

So all these other things happen; they always happen. People have always been more vulgar than the people we go around with.

[Laughter.]

**Richard Lanham:** I mean, you don't have to be an Ivy League WASP like me to know that there are people like us and there are other people, and you know who is better. Which English bishop said, "The reason why you study classical Greek is so as to be able to look down on your fellow man from a comfortable elevation." You know, that's why we do a lot of things.

And so I don't think that. So I tend to know these other things are all there. I know that there is a vulgarity which seems bottomless. But I don't know. The last two or three years, I did a lot of traveling, a lot of lecturing, at least in the university world. And I've met an awful lot of smart people, doing an awful lot of smart things. I haven't met as many smart people in your world as I ought to or wanted to. But I'm not decimated. Sorry not to be more dismal than humanists –

**Marty Kaplan:** That's okay. We're happy to change the direction of the trend line for you.

**David Merkoski:** Just to reply, so my point is somewhat clearer: I don't think we're headed for a dystopia. I actually think it is good times ahead.

But what I do see happening is that the technology that we have is basically allowing us to extend ourselves in time and space, so that we actually aren't present for the repercussions of our actions anymore.

*The technology that we have is basically allowing us to extend ourselves in time and space, so that we actually aren't present for the repercussions of our actions anymore.*

MERKOSKI





One kind of glib example, from about two years ago, is the Internet site that allows you to basically pilot a rifle in a deer range, so you can shoot a rifle and kill deer from the comfort of your own office. And they'll actually go out and they'll get that deer, and package it up for you, and they'll cut it up and they'll sell it – or you can have it, too.

But it's this kind of idea of super-humanism or trans-humanism that you are more than just the sphere of influence that we have right now in this room – the things that I could destroy or create in the immediate present.

And what we're now able to do is affect things far away from our time and space. And because we have no sense of the repercussions of that, I think that around us, things are kind of tumbling down, and we don't react; there's no feedback loop to that. And so whereas before, everything was very immediate and present, and we could adjust our reaction the next time – that is, learn from our mistakes – we're moving into a world where it's very hard to know exactly what that qualitative output of what your decisions were, and how to change the character of yourself as a result.

**Richard Lanham:** Well, I can't deny that.

**Marty Kaplan:** Other questions?

Then let me ask Tim, if you would, to describe the partnership that frog and the Lear Center have to create the Center of Attention. And Johanna, chime in and take us into virtual reality.

**Tim Leberecht:** Yeah. We should probably do it together, because it's the partnership.

**Johanna Blakley:** Oh, it's a partnership, okay.

**Tim Leberecht:** Yes. So my name is Tim Leberecht. I'm Vice President of Marketing for frog design. And we're extremely proud to partner with the Norman Lear Center on this project, in Second Life, this virtual community. And David mentioned sort of the immediate presence, and attempts to go beyond that immediate presence and study attention in the virtual realm, so beyond the immediate presence.

And that's what the Center of Attention is about. The proposition really was wouldn't it be nice to be in the Center of Attention virtually for five minutes of fame, and then study the implications of those, and study the reaction, the response, to things in the virtual realm, in a contained environment? That was the initial position that triggered the project.

*Wouldn't it be nice to be in the Center of Attention virtually for five minutes of fame, and then study the implications of those, and study the reaction, the response, to things in the virtual realm, in a contained environment?*

LEBERECHT





And for us as a design firm, I think it was particularly interesting to see what happens to real things if you translate them into the virtual realm, right? Do they change their character? How do people respond to it? What happens to real objects if you turn them into virtual objects? And then, did they sort of gain a new life in the virtual realm?



I also have to say that the history of this entire project, which we kicked off in December 2006, I believe, has been like an interesting case study of attention. Because it sort of moved from a top-down level, where there was a lot of interest during the heydays of media hype around Second Life, to more of a grassroots effort at frog design, where it's now really fully embraced by the designers. So it sort of underwent different stages of attention within the organization itself.

But you should maybe talk about the island itself –

**Johanna Blakley:** Yeah.

**Tim Leberecht:** – and how it looks, and what it does.

**Johanna Blakley:** I have a few pictures of it. We're still working on it like crazy, and I'll show you a picture of the guy who's working on it, who's in there right now. He's thinking maybe we'll visit him; maybe we will.

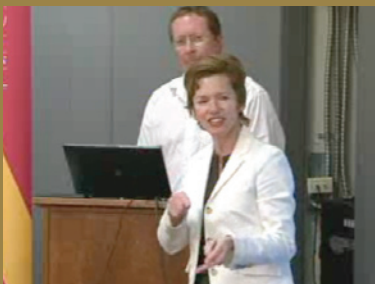
But do you guys know about Second Life? You've heard of it? How many people don't know what it is at all? Okay, so most of you do. Okay.

So it's a virtual world; it's not a game. People live and work in there. And so it's an excellent place for academics like ourselves, and designers as well, to study how humans behave in this environment. If they're going to remake and remodel a new world entirely out of digital bits, and try to live in it, sort of like we do in our lives, what does that say about our real world? How are they reconstructing things in that world to mirror or not mirror what we do out here?

One of the things that inevitably develops is an attention economy. People are trying to get attention for their avatars, for their businesses, for the new buildings they built – how do they do it? How do they market themselves?

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BLAKLEY



There's a currency in Second Life, where money is exchanged. It's called Lindens. And 265 of them are worth a U.S. dollar today. So it's a real economy. There's about \$17 million U.S. dollars circulating in there right now. Seven hundred thousand people visit this world every month. There's about 60,000 there every day around two p.m., which I think is their peak moment, and 19 million people have signed up from all around the world. There's portions of Second Life I really can't go to, because I can't read the signage, and I can't understand what anybody's saying.



So it's really a laboratory space. I wanted to mention that, because I think there has been a lot of media hype about Second Life, and people have sort of written it off as this virtual world that got really popular with marketers and e-commerce companies last year, but what's going on now?

And the fact is it's still growing. I think it's growing at a better rate now than it was last year, in terms of people signing up. And that's what we really need is a concentration of people in there, doing things and building things, so that we can study it.



So these are just a few screenshots of the island, which is really literally in progress right now. You can flip to the next – oh, that's the last slide. But that's okay.

That's the designer. His name is Subtle Singh in-world. And somehow he found a frog-prince outfit. And so whenever I go to the island, and I'm looking for a frog who's doing work, I usually see him. Go ahead to the next one.



He has built a model that's not quite done yet, and I think he lost a lot of the work he did last night. It's still, yeah, a really sketchy sort of environment. This is a very famous TV that –

**Tim Leberecht:** This is actually – this is actually work that we did in frog design in the '70s for Wega, which is an old German television manufacturer, which got acquired by Sony. So it's really like an iconic design that sort of reoccurs here in the virtual realm.

**Johanna Blakley:** Yeah. And at first, it had sort of crash-landed into the middle of this target area. The whole island is literally called the Center of Attention. And so we wanted to sort of give people the opportunity to feel as if, even virtually, they were in the Center of Attention at some point in their lives.

See the red line there is a sign of where people teleport into the island. And they get to teleport directly into the center of the target. But for awhile there, the Wega TV was actually turned on its edge and jammed into the earth, which was really cool, and it had some really great video running on it. And there's the frog up there, of course.

We have an amphitheater that's built into the side of the island with a floating screen out on the edge. One of the things we're trying to do in here is to figure out how can you sort of remake modern architecture and rework it in a world where you don't have to really abide by the same sorts of physics laws that exist here today?

So here, you can sit on the precipitous edge of an island. You can have a podium emerge out of water, and you can watch on a floating screen a movie about the Lear Center – this is actually in our release and our brochure, which is weird.

And that's my avatar. I just got the hair. Isn't it great?

*[Laughter.]*

**Johanna Blakley:** It's blue and silver.

We also have within it – I didn't have a chance to take a picture of the whole thing – we have an exhibition, a permanent exhibition, that's about the history of attention. And what we tried to do is select a really interesting sort of collection of iconic objects that were developed in order to attract attention.

And sometimes these are very metaphoric, as this one is, where we use a microphone. And it's sort of spinning inside this weird gallery display case. You can get all this extra information about it, just like you could in a gallery. And this is really an icon of how sound bites and shrinking attention spans became the sort of way that attention was discussed in the 1990s.

We also include a rose window, you know – a unique sort of creation that was used in order to educate people who are not literate about biblical stories and churches – a pyramid, a peacock feather – nature's way of sort of creating an object that would attract attention of the female peacock.

Is there anymore? Okay, that's the last one. They were all out of

*And that's my  
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BLAKLEY



order, so I wasn't sure.

But that's just a glimpse of what's going on on the island. Right now, it's very much in laboratory shape. And we'll definitely make a public announcement, when we're inviting people to really come and partake.

**Richard Lanham:** Can I ask a question?

**Johanna Blakley:** Yeah.

**Richard Lanham:** I have two questions. One, is the exchange rate between Lindens and dollars flexible or fixed?

**Johanna Blakley:** It changes.

**Richard Lanham:** It changes –

**Johanna Blakley:** Oh, yeah.

**Richard Lanham:** A flexible exchange rate.

**Johanna Blakley:** But it's been hovering around 260 to 265 over the last few weeks.

**David Merkoski:** Corporate execs have actually developed to intermediate the currency between all the game worlds, you know, between Dungeons & Dragons and –

**Richard Lanham:** So there's currency, there are George Soros speculators.

**David Merkoski:** Yeah, they are George Soros. And you can exchange that for dollars, for gift cards, for whatever – any of these economies – the currency in there.

**Richard Lanham:** Can I ask you a larger question? Because I don't know anyone who knows as much about this as you do. It looks like a world – it reminds me of those card games when all the cards are wild. And how can you have a card game when every card is wild?

**Johanna Blakley:** I think that is a critique –

**Richard Lanham:** If there are no constraints, it's not simply economics that talks about the allocation of scarce commodities that have alternative uses. This is a world in which there's finally no scarcity. And how does it work?

**Johanna Blakley:** Well, there's a scarcity of design time, that's for sure. And the tools are very difficult to use, and it takes people a lot of time to actually

*This is a world in which there's finally no scarcity. And how does it work?*

LANHAM



create objects that are worth selling.

**Richard Lanham:** I see.

**Johanna Blakley:** And that's why people buy them.

**Richard Lanham:** I see.

**Johanna Blakley:** I buy stuff all the time in-world, because it would take me forever, forever, to make even the tiniest little thing that I need to use.

**Richard Lanham:** I see. I see.

**Johanna Blakley:** And so it's design skill that is worth the most money in-world – that and real estate. There's 360 miles of terraformed landscape in Second Life that people are purchasing and selling.

And in 2006, there was already a Korean woman who became a millionaire, just based on buying parcels of fake land in Second Life, building it up, putting condos on it, putting storefront shops, mixed-use, whatever – building covenants for the land in order to control who would be your neighbor, because otherwise, you could have some weird sex bar next door, or you could have fuzzy furry people who were having sex. And you wanted to make sure that your neighborhood had some control. And so she was very good at creating these communities. And people would buy the land from her with the improvements on it, because they didn't want to go through the trouble of building these buildings and, you know, coming up with rules for neighborhoods.

So that's really the limited resources: the amount of human ingenuity and time that it takes to create objects in-world. A tiny percentage, I think it's like 0.5%, of the objects in-world were actually created by the company that owns the site. It's entirely user-generated.

And that's the other reason it's an excellent place for us to study human behavior and to look at what people are building. Because it's not just one corporate idea of what ought to happen in a virtual world; it's 13 million people deciding what ought to be in a virtual world.

*It's not just one corporate idea of what ought to happen in a virtual world; it's 13 million people deciding what ought to be in a virtual world.*

BLAKLEY

**Richard Lanham:** I'm sure people have put Second Life in the tradition in Western thought of utopias, where it belongs. How is the thinking going in that way?

**Johanna Blakley:** Well, I think a lot of the original inhabitants, people who've been there a long time and who are really, deeply invested in their Second Life identity, people who are in there 40 hours a week – you've heard about people who are into EverQuest or into World of Warcraft. There are also a population of people who really like to live full time in Second Life. And many of them feel that last year it became too corporatized – that there were too many professional designers coming in and upping the standards for design in-world in a way that was entirely to make money, and not to develop a community where people could become friends and get to know one another, and develop niche communities.

So it's the same thing that happened on the Internet, in a way, with people who felt like this is an academic community, this is a space where we can exchange information. Oh my God, the retailers are coming. Oh no, it's Amazon, it's eBay; they're going to ruin it all! So a lot of the same sorts of complaints that we heard in the early phases of the Internet, I'd say they're being replicated in Second Life.

**Richard Lanham:** Have people talked about this in terms of, say, the foundation of utopian communities in 19th Century America? The cycle you talk about is exactly what happened to all kinds of communities – Shaker communities, Brook Farm, dozens of them.



**Marty Kaplan:** I feel a Richard Lanham book coming on –

*[Laughter.]*

**Marty Kaplan:** – which is my cue to thank you all for coming and to ask you to join me in thanking our amazing panelists.