Article

Popular Culture in a Digital Society: Nine Paradoxes

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Definition

This paper, which identifies nine paradoxes particular to popular culture in a digital society, begins by distinguishing art and culture, since scholars have historically relied on these terms to differentiate popular culture, mass culture, and mass art. Digital societies, which exist both online and offline, are awash in digital products such as LED signs, digital imagery, video games, film, podcasts, and social media. In a digital society, popular culture is effectively "mass art," which exhibits five properties: 1) digital media's low-cost products and low-skill tools are 2) created and distributed to appeal to as broad a cultural sector as possible (qualitative) and thus aim to 3) attract consumers (quantitative) who capably enjoy and deploy cultural content both 4) offline and online, yet "popularity" ultimately depends on 5) efforts to maximize unity and minimize fragmentation. Although popular culture is largely a thing of the past, mass art as we know it will flourish until human beings go extinct. The next frontier will be finding ways to prevent artificial intelligence from producing cultural products, not because they will be terrible, undesirable, or fake, but because the culture-making process engenders human wellbeing.

Keywords: popular culture; mass culture; mass art; digital imagery; video games; TikTok; social media; attention economy; creatives

1. The First Paradox: Deploying Algorithms to Target Audiences

Every historical era has exhibited an appreciable approach to popular culture. Popular culture includes activities, whether festivals, sports, dress, foodways, street art, or entertainment that attract broad audiences because people deem them accessible and customizable. By contrast, *folk culture* is "the product of 'a comparatively stable, traditional social order'," which reflects "shared values (rather than embodying conflict), originates [from the] bottom-up, and enjoys relative stability over time" (Glynn, 2011, xxviii). Few popular culture scholars consider societies stable. Popular culture rather makes do with what is available. However, a popular culture associated with a generation, region, or ethnic group that lends practitioners their cultural identity effectively doubles as a folk culture.

Prehistoric examples of popular culture include the elaborate pictographs, petroglyphs, and large-scale geoglyphs drawn by ancient cultures inhabiting caves in southern France, deserts of the Arabian Peninsula, and the American plains. The Greeks gathered around theater, festivals, music, poetry, and food. Apparently, the Athens of ancient Greece celebrated 120 festival days a year (Mikalson, 1976), while the world's oldest ongoing festivals include the New Year's festival Navruz, the Jewish celebration of Passover, and Holi, the Festival of Colors, celebrated annually in India since the 4th century. The medieval age added rituals, parades, and fireworks. In the 19th century, story papers, serial books, and pulp fiction thrived. The 20th century saw the rise of cartoons, graphic novels, anime, manga, murals, graffiti, street art, alongside music recordings (from wax to tape to mp3s), movies (from film to video to mp4s), TV, and cable TV, which was initially billed as "advertising-free." Not surprisingly, 21st century popular culture is primarily digital.

Given that today's online content is largely driven by algorithms, some might argue that it's nearly impossible to generate popular culture via the internet, as compared to more widely accessible, digital formats such as radio, albums, cinema, and TV. So long as no two people are dished up the

same menu of cultural options, media distribution is a *niche* business (distributed to targeted consumers). Online content that fails to reach the broader public diminishes its chances of gaining in popularity. When society is so fragmented that so few people share, let alone appreciate, similar cultural experiences, can anything count as popular? For example, Jimmy Kimmel's "return" on 23 September 2025 garnered 6.3 million live TV views, whereas 29 million people streamed it. Either way, does a total of 35 million global viewers in a world of 1.53 billion English speakers exemplify popularity? Similarly, a *New York Times* "best seller" typically sells between 10,000 and 100,000 copies in a year, an even tinier fraction of the number of potential consumers.

While "entry costs" have historically proven the biggest barrier to popularity, these days, fragmented audiences risk rendering popular culture obsolete. So long as we value popular culture's capacity to unite people, data collection meant to identify and target "siloed" viewers proves counterproductive. Social media exacerbates this problem by cordoning off people into small clicks. In attempting to dominate the private and the political spheres, social media has set the stage for worldliness to spin out of control, causing the public square to unravel into an intangible web that manufactures, though it claims to mirror, public opinion (Spaid 2019a, 678).

This paper begins with a discussion of the distinction between art and culture, which relates to how scholars have historically differentiated popular culture, mass culture, and mass art. As already noted, digital societies exist both online and offline, since digital products, whether LED signs, digital imagery, video games, or film, are fixtures of our offline world. This paper identifies eight additional paradoxes associated with popular culture. As we shall see, popular culture in a digital society is effectively "mass art" and exhibits five key properties: 1) digital media's low-cost products and low-skill tools are 2) created and distributed to appeal to as broad a cultural sector as possible (qualitative) and thus aim to 3) attract consumers (quantitative) who capably enjoy and deploy cultural content both 4) offline and online, yet "popularity" ultimately depends on 5) efforts to maximize unity and minimize fragmentation.

Paradox 1 Digital societies employ algorithms to identify target audiences and direct relevant content, which fragments the public such that "popular" culture is no longer attainable.

2. The Second Paradox: Popularizing Popular Culture

Although people tend to use the terms art and culture synonymously, they are different categories with distinct receptions, even though they often share identical mediums such as images, sounds, smells, and materials, and thus exhibit similar perceptual properties. That people deem popular culture accessible differentiates it from idiosyncratic artworks. Popular culture attracts more people because many more people know about it (thanks to marketing and influencers) and identify with it. What makes something *popular* is that many more people believe "that's for me" than they do "that's not for me." They demonstrate their beliefs by attending, consuming, and sharing their interests with others, thus increasing a thing's popularity.

Contemporary artworks, especially unfamiliar ones, tend to prompt people to ask questions and demand interpretations (Spaid 2022). However, over time, even contemporary artworks, especially public monuments, gain in popularity. Two examples of art that have become popular over time include 19th century Impressionist paintings and the art of Yayoi Kusama, who routinely ranks as the world's most popular contemporary artist in terms of exhibition attendance and global sales (2015).

This is not to say that groups of people don't bond around art the way they bond around culture. Indeed, artworks attract art lovers, support groups, and devoted fans, though such communities are typically smaller in scale than "stans" associated with popular culture. The term "stan" originated with Eminem's 2000 song "Stan" about a devoted fan who obsessively sends a rapper fan mail. These days, a single Taylor Swift concert attracts around 50,000 Swifties, while it takes two weeks to garner such attendances at the Venice Biennale and three days at the MET in New York City. Even so, twice as many Americans visit art museums as attend major league sporting events (ohiohistory.org, 2015).

Audiences tend to gravitate toward cultural products that affirm their values, strengthen their identities, and boost their wellbeing. A rather diverse category, culture captures a wide variety of

activities from foodways to fashion, holiday celebrations, sports, and entertainment. Culture reifies people's identities, since people of the same age group, ethnic background, language, religion, or locality find themselves appreciating shared offerings, such as regional specialties, sports teams, festivals, and homegrown talent. By contrast, artworks, which are comparatively idiosyncratic, tend to challenge people's values, which risks engendering illbeing.

Keen to differentiate popular culture from avant-garde art, the art historian Clement Greenberg distinguished popular culture as "commercial art and literature with their chromeotypes, magazine covers, illustrations, ads, slick and pulp fiction, comics, Tin Pan Alley music, tap dancing, Hollywood movies, etc." (1989, 9). In his 1939 essay "The Avant-Garde and Kitsch," Greenberg derided popular culture as "kitsch," since he considered it a gimmick worth far less than its cost.

> To fill the demand of the new market, a new commodity was devised: ersatz culture, kitsch, destined for those who, insensible to the values of genuine culture, are hungry nevertheless for the diversion that only culture of some sort can provide. Kitsch, using for raw material the debased and academicized simulacra of genuine culture, welcomes and cultivates this insensibility. It is the source of its profits. Kitsch is mechanical and operates by formulas. Kitsch is vicarious experience and faked sensations. Kitsch changes according to style, but remains always the same. Kitsch is the epitome of all that is spurious in the life of our times. Kitsch pretends to demand nothing of its customers except their money-not even their time. (10)

Although Greenberg's claim that "genuine culture" remains out of reach for the masses because they've been duped by formulas that blind them to "genuine culture" is overdetermined, he recognized the attention economy's capacity to skew distribution. No doubt, marketing, which typically accounts for 25% of production budgets, plays a major role in gaining people's attention and generating popularity. Although Greenberg later disavowed his criticism of kitsch, since he was more concerned by "academic art" than popular culture, he never explained what he meant by "genuine culture." We are left to infer that "genuine culture" refers to that era's modernist avant-gardes, as surrealism and epic theatre gave rise to biomorphic abstraction and theater of the absurd. If this is so, "genuine culture" is "high art," not culture. Even so, Greenberg was right to worry about the way nations deploy popular culture to manipulate people into supporting them.

That popular culture's content is generally uncontroversial boosts its popularity. That is, popular culture is deemed both suitable for and accessible to the general public. While not everyone (though apparently enough) appreciates popular culture, it tends not to stir public debates regarding its content. However, popular culture isn't necessarily global. Its interest can be local, that is, relevant to a particular region, subgroup, or generation. When experienced firsthand, popular culture's audience is limited to "those who actually show up to experience to experience [it]," whereas digitization privatizes popular culture, transforming it into "mass culture," whose distribution is amplified. According to Shivanka Gautum, "The difference here is that mass culture is an all-encompassing façade that produces products for both the majority and the minority, whilst popular culture is that which is [actually] consumed by a majority of the audience." She continues:

> Mass culture is then, a culture which is mass-produced, distributed, and marketed. Popular culture is that which emerges from mass culture, according to the majority opinion. Music produced on an industrial scale and made available through a plethora of apps and sites such as Apple Music, Spotify, and sound cloud are indicative of mass culture but the specific artists and songs that rise to the top are indicative of the popular culture. Mass culture produces unified content, designed to reach as many recipients as possible. It comprises all forms of culture, encompassing the counter-culture and underground sub-cultures as well. It functions on the "Something for everyone" principle.

Although the attention economy is typically associated with online activities, offline activities are no less subject to the attention economy. With popular culture, how something becomes popular is less important than the fact of its popularity. What matters is that there are mechanisms in play to

engender data, some measurable index, even if the data-gathering tools are more top-down than bottom-up. With popular culture, people don't necessarily have control over their preferences, since popularity itself becomes a self-fulfilled prophecy, so long as inundation causes audiences either to appreciate cultural products or grow tired of them, leading them to move onto the next fad. Sheer numbers identify popular culture. Being popular indicates, rather than *causes* mass appeal (Spaid 2018, 63). Online, "page rank" reflects volume, and thus conveys popularity.

According to John Fiske, who wrote extensively about this topic in *Understanding Popular Culture,* popular culture is manufactured by the interests of the people who "scan the repertoire produced by the culture industry to find products that they can use for their own cultural purposes. The industry similarly constantly scans the tastes and interests of the people to discover ones that it can commodify and turn to its own profit" (2011). He considered this dynamic relationship to mold itself according to popular demand. Of course, these days, corporations use AI to scan people's data to even more accurately glean their tastes and interests. According to Gautum, popular culture is what the greater public absorbs, thanks to the attention economy and despite algorithms' faulty distribution mechanisms.

Paradox 2 Although "popular" suggests shared aesthetic preferences, popularity rather reflects shared beliefs regarding accessibility, which marketing campaigns and media hype reinforce.

3. The Third Paradox: Digitizing Popular Culture

Fiske considered popular culture derived from mass culture, which includes the "cultural 'products' put out by an industrialized, capitalist society" (2011, i). Such products are designed with mass audiences in mind, whereas "popular culture [concerns] the ways in which people use, abuse, and subvert these products to create their own meanings and messages" (i). Noël Carroll's notion of mass art, which he defines as "popular art produced and distributed by a mass technology" (1998, 3) blends Fiske's notions of mass culture (accessible) and popular culture (customizable), since Carroll considers mass art both broadly accessible and "personalizable." While Fiske had in mind jean wearers physically customizing their jeans, Carroll's notion of "personalizable" includes the many ways we engage mass art, whether by reworking it or interpreting it.   While popular culture is a subset of mass culture, Carroll's notion of "mass art" is a term all its own, though it bears resemblance to "mass popular art," a term coined by Lawrence Alloway in 1958 to cover nonart formats such as comic books, billboards, cars, science fiction, popular music, and westerns (Spaid 2022). Although Carroll originally considered mass art a subset of art, the fact that he treats mass art's interpretation as optional, rather than obligatory, makes it inclusive of art and culture.

Although Carroll uses the term "popular art," he doesn't have Pop Art in mind. He rather categorizes film, television, radio, albums, and books as popular art since they're created with broad audiences in mind, whose wide distribution qualifies them as mass art. He elaborates, "For a mass artwork to be successful, these structures of engagement must be accessible to large numbers of people. Consequently, the mass artwork (at least ideally) gravitates toward structures that render it comprehensible —cognitively, emotionally, and morally— to masses of people" (414). Carroll's emphasizing "structures" suggests that the medium, not the content, renders mass art accessible. Since Carroll's notion of mass art is all encompassing and even accounts for the way audiences personalize mass art, he denies the distinction between mass culture produced as cultural commodities and mass art created as art.

Carroll identifies mass art's three conditions as follows: "x is a mass artwork if and only if 1. x is a multiple instance or type artwork, 2. produced and distributed by a mass delivery technology, 3. which is intentionally designed to gravitate toward those choices which promise accessibility for the largest number of untutored (or relatively untutored) audiences" (232). Although he primarily associates the term "mass art" with cultural products such as radio, television, and film that "require a mass production and delivery technology," as opposed to artforms such as theatre, visual art, and musical concerts that are primarily experienced firsthand, "mass art" suitably categorizes the distribution of artworks and popular culture alike, whose digital availability in the form of either

commercially-available digital recordings or online live streams, podcasts, social media, or blogs renders almost everything mass art these days. Elsewhere, I've expanded Carroll's notion of mass art to include the use of online content to generate interest in artworks such as street art, public art, and theater that are primarily experienced firsthand:

> Although [some artworks] are designed to be directly experienced, they typically furnish mass-consumable reproductions (recall that Carroll's view excludes plays, though presumably not simulcasts). No doubt, fans posting souvenir snaps online enhance attendance, inspiring ever more people to experience for themselves what their friends already have…. And perhaps Carroll himself would agree that photographable [events] are not only tokenable, but [digital recordings] count as mass art. It thus seems odd to consider the tokens generated by some event, such as Instagram postings that draw large audiences, mass art; though not the underlying [event] that makes the posting possible.   (Spaid 2018, 67).

Paradoxically, digital recordings serve as *tokens* of autographic artworks (unique types), while they render allographic artworks (editions and performances) *types*, since "tracks" serve as the "standard" to which performances are compared (Schuller 1997). Mass art thus holds a monopoly, so long as digital recordings are easily made, distributed, consumed, and personalizable. Digital tokens, available online or offline, thus enable unexpectedly large numbers of people to assess the accessibility of types, which magnifies their popularity. This is why I earlier claimed that popularity indicates, rather than causes mass appeal. No doubt, tracking "key performance indicators" (KPIs) proves easier than tracking offline circulation, where it is assumed that people share media, but how much gets recirculated and how often are extremely difficult to verify. KPIs include impressions (number of times an ad is display or viewed), search engine rankings (getting seen requires a top ranking), click-through rate (clicks per impressions), cost per click (ad cost per total clicks), conversion rate (percent who take action), customer acquisition cost (cost to lure new client), and return on investment (Gibson 2025). Other indicators include unique visitors, page views, session duration, bounce rate, and diverse traffic sources (Research Hub 2025), all of which are used to generate website engagement metrics, traffic statistic tools, social media metrics, brand popularity metrics, and digital audience measurement.

Exemplary of the massive audiences available our digital world, Taylor Swift's latest album *The Life of a Showgirl* broke Spotify's 2025 streaming record with nearly 249.9 million first-day streams (Roces 2025). Meanwhile, her feature film *The Official Release Party of a Showgirl*, which was shown for one weekend only, generated 28% of its sales overseas. The "biggest album debut event in cinema history," *The Official Release Party of a Showgirl* raked in $46 million in just three days, making it that weekend's number one box office hit (Whitten 2025).

Paradox 3 Cultural platforms in the form of social media, websites, and youtube.com render all culture mass art, which blends mass culture's accessibility and popular culture's customizability.

4. The Fourth Paradox: Customizing Popular Culture/Personalizing Mass Culture

In contrast to analog 20th century mass culture, which was typically produced and distributed by corporations, though publicly accessible for a fee; digital 21st century mass culture is often self-produced, yet distributed via privately-held websites behind a pay wall or for free, sponsored by ads.[1] Today's prevalence of self-production reflects the ease with which people personalize mass art. Online, we find fanzines (reader-driven novels that riff on extant stories from literature and film), memes (humorous imagery), podcasts, TikTok videos, YouTube videos, TV clips, comedy specials,

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[1] Although the internet appears publicly accessible to those who are online, the internet is rather private, since most sites are owned and operated by corporations that alter user terms at will. A case in point is TikTok, which was recently purchased by Oracle founder Larry Ellison, who immediately updated its standards policy to forbid influencers from denouncing Israel's actions without also denouncing Hamas' actions.

Substack opinion pieces, plus social media sites where people upload content to share with peers, such as Instagram, Facebook, X, Reddit, Thread, and Blue Sky. With so much musical content circulating online for free, pop stars increasingly depend on live shows rather than record sales for revenue (2015).

Unlike Greenberg, who framed popular culture as passive, that is, people consume it unreflectively; Carroll denies the active/passive distinction. For him, everything presented must also be received, which means that active consumers "personalize" mass art no differently than jeans-wearers customize their blue jeans by ripping them or writing on them (Fiske). When it comes to literature, Carroll characterizes "personalization" as follows:

> Among the audience's activities, I also include filling in presuppositions,   picking up on implications, interpreting narrative meaning — both in terms of what events signify and how they fit into larger causal explanations of the course of events in the story— as well as colligating events and characters under the rubric of themes, interpreting metaphors, detecting theses, and the gamut of other spectatorial and readerly activities enumerated throughout this text and earlier ones. (414)

The recent addition of picture generators powered by artificial intelligence such as OpenArt, Midjourney, DALL-E, and Stable Diffusion, as well as AI video generators LTX and Sora 2, enhance people's skillsets, thus enabling ever more viewers to become content producers, or "creatives," a trend Carroll predicted nearly 30 years ago.

> The evolutionary trajectory of communication technology is away from mass art and toward customized art. The consumer of the future will not be part of a mass audience. Consumers of the future will be empowered by new information technologies and they will be able to personalize their own artistic menus, often interactively. Indeed, perhaps we will all become artists in the coming cyber-Utopias so many da Vincis plugging away at our personal work stations (oopsentertainment centres). (1998, 11)

Incidentally, the desire for customization and trend toward personalizibility renders popularity unfashionable. By denying the active/passive distinction for mass art that has long distinguished art from culture, Carroll eliminated *tout court* any need for categories other than mass art, and thus erased the distinction between mass culture and popular culture once and for all. From now on, I will use the term mass art to convey popular culture in a digital society.

Paradox 4 The more mass art becomes personalizable, the less space is left for popular culture.

5. The Fifth Paradox: Disembodied Immersion

In the artworld, immersion means that the artwork, whether installation art or video art, envelops people's bodies. In terms of popular culture, one imagines either a parade, a concert with concertgoers moving to music, or a festival such that spectators are completely surrounded. With digital art, the physical experience associated with "immersion" is replaced by a focused attention that makes participants feel present (in a particular place), despite "there being no there there." Although the immersion associated with mass art, whether films, television, VR, or video games, is "disembodied," their respective sound tracks prove immersive. Thanks to recent technology, sound systems avail embodied sounds on par with live concerts, which has made "speaker hugging" a popular rave activity.

Pioneered by Lucas Film in 1983, the THX system tests a theater's "surround sound" effect for films recorded with both digital and analog (stereo) sound. No doubt, surround sound feels immersive, since spectators easily senses horses galloping nearby. According to THX's website,

> Unique to every THX Certified Cinema is the THX "baffle wall." If you were to peel away the screen at any THX Certified Cinema, you will see a massive wall of speakers housed in an acoustic baffle. The baffle wall is approximately the same size as the screen, providing a solid, smooth and uninterrupted surface to distribute sound throughout the auditorium. It produces a large sound image and accurately tracks sound elements with the onscreen

action. This makes panning shots and off-screen sounds more believable and natural, helping to pull audiences into the storyline. Without a baffle wall, sound is uncontrolled – producing a weak, uneven image. (Mellor 2013)

Despite mass art's disembodied reality, sound makes it feel "immersive." Even so, mass art scholars use the term immersion to mean "total disassociation from reality." When it comes to video games, scholars appear to take the idea of immersion for granted. Consider this thesis sentence, "One of the most pleasurable aspects of video games is their ability to induce immersive experiences (Michailidis et al.,2018). According to Michailidis et al., users rate video-game immersion via a questionnaire. Immersion entails "concentration, loss of time perception, a balance between the player's skills and the game's demands, and loss of self-awareness."

They add, "Toward a more precise identification of experiential intensity, it is critical to quantify an immersive episode by its duration, latency (time taken to trigger the episode), intensity, and frequency of breaks (how often the episodes are interrupted)."

Moreover, immersion ranges from engagement to engrossment and finally total immersion. According to Brown and Cairns (2004), "engagement and engrossment – which encompass physical and emotional investment in the game, loss of self-awareness and sustained attention – *prime* the experience of presence." To explain this phenomena, Gernot Böhme remarks how "the materiality of an object casts a sensory spell, independent of its material origin. This perspective challenges the conventional view that an object's significance is confined to its functional or structural properties. Instead, materiality operates autonomously, producing aesthetic and emotional effects and affects that extend beyond utilitarian purpose" (Sangotra, 2025). No doubt, sound technology plays a huge role in priming the experience of presence.

Nikhil Sangotra notes that Felix Zimmermann and Christian Hubert, who designate "walking simulators" a video game genre, "employ Gernot Böhme's concept of *The Language of Stage Setting* to theorize how intentionally curated virtual spaces legitimize and elucidate the affective responses elicited by such games. They position 18th-century English landscape gardens—spaces designed for aesthetic immersion rather than utility—as historical analogs to what they term 'awareness spaces,' a framework they contrast with the predominantly functional design of conventional video game environments." With most games, the environment creates the game's constraints: "walls demarcate boundaries, foliage enables stealth, and terrain dictates movement. These elements remain subordinate to gameplay mechanics, their materiality rendered invisible under the demands of interactivity" (Sangotra).

Sangotra appears to recognize the paradox I've identified here: "if physical gardens and virtual worlds both stage materiality to produce affect, how do we reconcile the ontological divide between tangible objects (a tree's bark) and digital signifiers (a polygon textured as bark)? This ontological ambiguity of digital objects—and the challenge of conceptualizing their materiality—invites a deeper philosophical inquiry" (Sangotra). Böhme's book *The Aesthetics of Atmospheres* applies the notion of atmospheres to explain how acoustic atmospheres make virtual experiences such as film and video games seem real. Sangotra notes that "Böhme suggests atmosphere is not background but totalities and extends his claim by saying that atmosphere is something that reaches outside the aesthetic text and does not limit itself to the object. It encompasses the text and the viewer together in a spatial organization or in other words, it binds the perceiver and the perceived text in a unity (Sangotra)." This perceived sense of "unity" captures immersion's disembodied reality that mass art scholars tend to take for granted.

Sangotra taps Laura Marks to frame spectators' dual state: "we are both 'inside' the film's world (feeling its textures as if they were our own) and 'outside' it (aware of our physical presence in a theater or living room). This duality prevents total absorption, maintaining a delicate balance between immersion and self-awareness." Moreover, "this reciprocal relationship fosters what Marks calls an 'erotics of looking'—a term that captures the intimate, collaborative exchange between viewer and film," which accommodates Carroll's denial of the passive/active distinction that originally distinguished popular culture and "genuine culture" (art). Sangotra praises video games'

ability to "synthesize environmental storytelling with player agency, crafting worlds that are both narrative spaces and participatory playgrounds."

Paradox 5 Video games are distinguished for their ability to induce immersive experiences, yet such experiences are rather "atmospheres," figments of disembodied imaginations.

6. The Sixth Paradox: Feeling Video Games

According to Sangotra, video games launch players into the beyond, enabling them to experience *haptic* feedback:

> What fundamentally separates video games from cinema is interactivity—a mechanic that adds layers of embodiment inaccessible to other visual media. While film phenomenology helps unpack the affective power of games, modern day game controllers with haptic feedback, e.g. the PlayStation 5's adaptive triggers, deepen immersion by simulating tactile sensations: the tension of a bowstring, the crunch of gravel underfoot. This parallels 4DX cinema technology, where seats rumble and scents permeate the theater, yet gaming's interactivity transcends such gimmicks by making the player an active agent within the world who participates with the environmental presence. Virtual reality (VR) takes this further, replacing physical bodies with digital avatars, yet even this disembodiment retains a paradoxical feltness—a reminder that perception is malleable, not fixed. (Sangotra)

In *Aesthetics and Video Games*, Christopher Bartel distinguishes playing the game from playing *with* the game. To demonstrate the kinds of aesthetic experiences video games offer, he distinguishes three varieties of "gaming" experiences: 1) playing to win, 2) narrative/storytelling experiences, and 3) the dollhouse experience, which includes playing around with the game, trying to figure out novel ways to experience it, above and beyond the game designer's intent. With this last category, players have their own agendas/innovations over and above the designers' intentions. Video game scholars distinguish "cheesing," which means abusing what's there, from glitches and limit breaking that they associate with narrative experiences. Imagine a player who is playing to win and thus figures out how to make their avatar, who ordinarily doesn't fly, fly so they can move more rapidly to the finish line.

Nele Van de Mosselaer values video games that allow for transgressive play and even encourages "aesthetic disobedience" (Neufeld 2015, Van de Mosselaer and Gualeni 2021), a feature that is particular to both board and video games, so long as they are open-ended. Ordinarily, we apply the term aesthetic disobedience to artists who push themselves in a new direction, not spectators, as is the case with video gamers. However, with video games, gamers who explore cheesing, glitches, and limit breaking bend the rules in order to remake the game to their advantage. The interactive nature of video games, and especially their hidden capacities and unknown outcomes, no doubt contributes to their overall popularity. Video games seem endlessly personalizible. Another feature virtually unique to video games is they offer gamers the chance to "step out of physics," that is, to experience something that defies the laws of nature.

Paradox 6 Despite being more filmic than real, video games' combination of sound, interactivity, narrative, and spatiality engender haptic (felt) sensibilities.

7. The Seventh Paradox: Belonging/Connecting via Mass Art

As already noted, popularity is a matter of distribution. In a pre-digital society, word of mouth, marketing, and traditions served to attract enthusiastic participants. These days, social media and online influencers play a huge role in bringing people together to experience mass art. However, potential participants who are effectively siloed since they can only access material targeted to them, remain out of the loop. Being neglected prevents them from taking part.

In contrast to Carroll's view that mass art is "designed to be accessible," mass art is rather the kind of thing large numbers of people experience because they deem it accessible, even if it's not, and anticipate that experiencing it will be rewarding. Just as eaters browse the internet to assess their

perfect dining options, the internet offers handy tools such as TikTok videos, social media, and youtube.com videos for evaluating accessibility and thus boosting consumers' access to cultural events of value. Consider that HD opera simulcasts and online streaming encourage rather than curtail ticket sales. Moreover, *niche* broadcasting in the form of streaming apps such as Hulu and Paramount+ tend to reach smaller audiences than "mainstream TV" once did, though their availing mass art to global audiences more than compensates for this.

Fans of television shows not only meet online to discuss their favorite shows, but they suggest story lines that the writers sometimes incorporate. According to Alhan Arsal (2025), "There was a time when fans were considered to be passive audience members who uncritically consumed whatever content they were fed by their favourite show. In recent times, this idea has been turned on its head, revealing new understandings of the role of fans in influencing the source materials of TV shows." He continues,

> Henry Jenkins, one of the foremost scholars in the field of media and audience studies, believes fans are now active participants in the production of TV shows. Jenkins coined the term "convergence culture" to explain the evolution that led fans to becoming co-producers of official content, rather than just passive consumers. Due to the proliferation of technology and social media, there has been a cultural shift in how media content is consumed and produced, with media fans coming together online from all over the world and influencing the objects of their fandom through collective effort. In this new era, fans directly interact with and shape media alongside producers, blurring the line between the two. (Arsan)

Arsan identifies three ways fans influence television: 1) fan-driven plotlines (he offers *Supernatural* as an example), 2) power of social media campaigns (he cites *Community*, whose lack of popularity led NBC to cancel it after five seasons, yet an online campaign led to Yahoo's streaming service picking it up for a sixth season), 3) streaming platforms and global fans (he points to the way streaming services enable shows that have "ended" to reach fresh audiences). Moreover, thousands of home entrepreneurs regularly conceive ever new ways to lure online viewers to watch content they've simply recorded and posted to their personal youtube channel. For example, Asian youtubers regularly post popular MSNBC news shows on their channels to attract viewers, which not only earns them money, but lures viewers to watch some home movie at the tail end that features creatives showcasing their needlepoint or drawings.

In 1998, Carroll couldn't have foreseen the way people today depend on technology, especially social media, websites, and youtube to assess a given cultural activity's accessibility and to share its viability. Moreover, cultural platforms transform artforms ordinarily not considered mass art, such as visual art exhibitions, street art, and public artworks into mass art, once they are reproduced (depicted or discussed) "and distributed by a mass technology." In privileging our watching broadcasts, listening to recordings, or viewing pictures, Carroll overlooked the way online discussions, websites, and podcasts transform otherwise autographic artworks into mass art. The anonymously written article "TikTok Is Destroying the Sanctity of Art – Why No One's Talking About It" describes the limits of artists' posting their art to TikTok, the primary issue being immediacy over longevity (theartbog.com). Not only are online platforms likely to reach many more people than would be reached without them, but people have historically experienced artworks more from pictures and recordings than from firsthand experiences, so people deem second hand accounts legitimate alternatives. Similarly, festivals like Cincinnati's Blink Light & Art Festival that attract millions of people to experience new videos projected onto the city's street art, enable otherwise autographic murals to become mass culture, thanks to distribution via online platforms. Carroll's view rightly characterizes mass art as according customers access to something worth consuming, but definitions of mass art need not exclude autographic (unique) artworks, since online media renders autographic artworks allographic (editions). However, as the first paradox indicates, internet algorithms risk skewing and distorting distribution.

On another front, multiplayer online games bring strangers together to play games. Games like *World of Warcraft* enable thousands of participants to engage strangers in games. There are even

cooperative games such as *Among Us* or *Phasmophobia*, where players work together to achieve objectives or solve mysteries. While mass art has the potential to attract loads of people, its popularity as mass art depends upon its capacity to keep people engaged.

Paradox 7 Despite the fact that mass art is always remote (happening somewhere else), people depend on mass art both to connect with others and to actively influence mass art elsewhere.

8. The Eighth Paradox: Speeding Through Life

Map apps, such as Google or Apple maps, make it possible to do many more activities in a day than ever before. When visiting an unfamiliar city, we map out our route so that we circulate the city in the most efficient way, which means hitting the spots we want to visit when they're both still open and offering the best deal, such as a happy hour or free visit.

Some might say there's a tendency to surf cities the way we surf the internet, hopping from one event to the next. Would it be better to thoroughly engage a few sites, rather than trying to hit them all? Before the internet, tourists would have known only about the most well-known sites. With the internet, banal cultural activities loom as "not to be missed." Not surprisingly, local citizens blame overtourism on the internet. According to Larry Brain, "The internet's impact on trip planning and social media's amplification of obscure places [has] reshape[d] tourism profoundly" (2025). He notes that using technology to curb tourism is more likely to boost it.

> Virtual tourism offers the idea of "virtual vacations" that let people experience places from their own homes. Studies suggest that virtual reality could disrupt tourism, similar to the online shopping reshaping retail. However, the appeal of this is uncertain. In the 1960s, color TV wildlife documentaries were thought to cut down on travel to African reserves, but instead, sparked more demand for these in-person trips. Similarly, films shot in awesome locations—like New Zealand's "Lord of the Rings"—often boost tourism rather than replace it. Virtual tourism could enhance anticipation, making "real" visits seem more desirable.

On a certain level, websites like Airbnb.com and booking.com exemplify mass art, since they too showcase creatives' endeavors as rehabbers and interior decorators to a global public.

No doubt, there's a "spillover effect." Our regular surfing the internet for information has led people to believe that they can capably absorb way more information than people could forty years ago. As a result, cultural activities, whether exhibitions, festivals, or craft fairs, keep expanding, making it humanly impossible to take in all of the material at hand. Simply put, we're over-stimulated, yet so long as over-stimulation is the norm, we actively resist avoiding stimulation. Incidentally, people used to discuss their cultural experiences with others, which helps people remember them. Increasingly, artworks exhibited in an exhibition seem more like data than objects. We walk around looking at things, trying to take in the experience, yet the vastness is beyond human absorption. It's as if the curator's need to demonstrate their vast knowledge (on par with the internet) of a particular subject requires a massive, though still incomplete (like the internet), exhibition, whose popularity is spurred by online testimonies and media hype. Like the dog wagging the tail, the need to generate online chatter stimulates the demand for bigger and more complicated cultural events whose online presence satisfies some, especially those engaged in hate speech, more than experiencing the actual events firsthand.

Paradox 8 The more mass technologies rehash yesteryear's content for new audiences (younger generations and people living elsewhere), the more mass art is reduced to a consumer good.

9. The Ninth Paradox: Connecting Wellbeing and Mass Art

While our skill at using online tools to chart complex itineraries exposes us to many more cultural activities, which makes us feel efficient, it also puts us at greater risk of suffering FOMO (feelings of missing out), whose antidote is JOMO (living a quiet life, free from social media). Thanks to technology, we have greater access to cultural activities, yet some of us realize only so much is

humanly possible. Is our 24-hour online access to cultural activities around the world improving our wellbeing and sense of connectedness or does it pose a challenge to our wellbeing?

Although the psychological consequences are still regularly debated, one recently-published research project examined "whether having (mobile) internet access or actively using the internet predicted eight well-being outcomes from 2006 to 2021 among 2,414,294 individuals across 168 countries" (Vuorre and Przybylski 2024). The eight indicators of wellbeing included: "life satisfaction, the extent to which individuals reported experiencing daily negative and positive experiences; two indices of social well-being; physical well-being, community well-being, and experiences of purpose" (2024). Using data originally collected from the Gallup World Poll, they found that 84.9% of the participants reported "positive and statistically significant associations between internet connectivity and well-being. These results indicate that internet access and use predict well-being positively and independently from a set of plausible alternatives." It thus appears that human beings who have internet access register a greater wellbeing than those lacking internet access. One self-admitted limitation of Vuorre and Przybylski's research is that they accepted "self-reporting" of internet use, while smartphone apps show a disconnect between self-reported and actual use (Vuorre and Przybylski 2024).

That internet users cited positive assessments of wellbeing is hardly surprising, since wellbeing signals some combination of access and capacity (Spaid 2019b, 8), similar in affect to Hannah Arendt's notion of freedom, where the "I will" and the "I can" coincide (Arendt 2000, 451).

Since the internet affords people information and skills, it's no wonder people lacking internet access report lower wellbeing. A lack of internet access no doubt reduces people's access to opportunities and capacities. Despite the generally positive association between internet use and wellbeing, Vuorre and Przybylski singled out young women for their negative associations.

> We did, however, observe a notable group of negative associations between internet use and community well-being. These negative associations were specific to young (15–24-year-old) women's reports of community well-being. They occurred across the full spectrum of covariate specifications and were thereby not likely driven by a particular model specification. Although not an identified causal relation, this finding is concordant with previous reports of increased cyberbullying (Przybylski & Bowes, 2017) and more negative associations between social media use and depressive symptoms (Kelly et al., 2018; but see Kreski et al., 2021). Further research should investigate whether low community well-being drives engagement with the internet or vice versa. (Vuorre and Przybylski 2023)

No doubt, people's attitudes reflect their internet experiences. Those who have been victims of cyber bullying, hate speech, revenge porn, human trafficking, financial scams, identity theft, or trolling/online harassment, are less likely to report positive outcomes. These days, online crime is on the rise, while real-world crime is declining. I imagine those who have successfully used social media to reconnect with long lost friends, connect with peers in internet chat rooms, or play multiplayer games with strangers are most likely to report positive experiences.

But wellbeing isn't simply a matter of internet access and greater capacities. As briefly noted above, popular culture generates wellbeing when its activities, in particular its opportunities for customization, favor self-concordance. Moreover, group activities related to popular culture tend to generate compensatory values that engender survival skills (Spaid 2019b). Unlike popular culture, even if mass art's production is a team activity, its distribution and consumption are comparatively singular (targeted). I thus imagine that activities related to personalizing mass art and broadcasting related results foster skillsets that boost access and thus foster wellbeing. But of course, such broadcasts risk illbeing should cyberbullies reject it.

Even Disney recognizes the need to customize and share, and thus stand to profit from affording their users such opportunities. During the November 2025 earnings report, Disney CEO Bob Iger remarked, "The other thing that we're really excited about, that AI is going to give us the ability to do, is to provide users of Disney+ with a much more engaged experience, including the ability for

them to create user-generated content and to consume user-generated content — mostly short-form — from others" (Moses 2025).

Paradox 9 Despite the rise of cybercrime, and the attendant fall in real-world crime, people who remain connected via their mobile devices report a greater wellbeing in eight different fields than those who remain unconnected.

10. The Upshot: Competing with Mass Art's Personalizing Tools

These days, the word "popular" is pretty much a misnomer. It may have meant something in the pre-digital era, but it's become rather unpopular to be "popular," though of course market domination still matters. Today's consumers are drawn to mass art that is personalizible. Consumers prefer to experience culture *when* they want and they desire customization opportunities that they can broadcast to their peers. All of these additional individualized actions not only compete in cyberspace for the attention spans previously afforded "popular" culture, but they compete for the attention once afforded rising pop stars. In an article titled "Why aren't more pop stars being born?," Chris Eggertsen offers several reasons for pop stars' decline, such as "the practice of signing more artists at labels, to the lessening <u>marketing</u> power of radio, to increased competition for time and attention from video games and social media — with some sources concluding that expectations for mass market appeal should be lowered in today's more fragmented media landscape (2023)." Not surprisingly, myriad readers weighed in online and offered the following five explanations:

1) TikTok killed traditional artistic development. Reddit user @anneofthisland on the r/popheads thread noted:

> TikTok isn't set up to boost artists, it's set up to boost individual songs…In the radio era, if a hit broke out, labels had significant sway to get that artist's second and third songs in front of you … they couldn't force you to like those songs, but they could force you to listen to them. But that's a lot harder to do in the streaming/TikTok era. If you hear a song you like on TikTok, there's a large chance you won't hear that artist's second/third singles unless you seek them out yourself. (Eggertsen 2023)

2) Risk-adverse record labels only sign people with pre-existing fanbases. Reddit user @moxieroxsox on the r/popheads thread responded:

> It took Rihanna 3 albums before she skyrocketed. Taylor Swift wasn't taken seriously until what? Speak Now? Red? Ariana did Broadway and TV before she started music and she has the voice of a literal angel. Beyoncé spent years tailoring her sound, not to mention all the years she spent developing her abilities in Destiny's Child. (Eggertsen 2023)

3) Record labels do this on purpose to prevent having to pay pop stars big fees. An unnamed Reddit user remarked:

> When you have stars that have a lot of momentum behind their career, and they have a lot of prestige, and they have a large and solid fanbase, they get to demand more from labels. If you have stars with much shorter careers… and shorter reigns in public interest, you don't have somebody who can walk into a negotiation, and demand more on their side of the deal with the label. (Eggertsen 2023)

4) Thanks to social media, our attention is too fragmented. Reddit user itsyagurlb added:

> We consume music differently now which also impacts how pervasive a song can be because of how individualized our streaming choices can be. Even in the age of iTunes, hits were more impactful because if you wanted to hear the hot new song, you might pay for it. Now? I can listen to a minute of the song on spotify without any real investment and move on if I dont vibe with it, and there's been no 'sale.' (Eggertsen 2023)

5) This is actually an improvement over the years when radio and MTV dominated. X user @fromage-enjoyer points out:

The current generation is winning. We aren't stuck with whatever big labels want to shove down our throats thanks to the internet. That has them scared since they lose profits, but for the artists and consumers it's great… Streaming pay outs need to be talked about however. (Eggertsen 2023)

Unlike yesteryear's celebrities, films, books, television shows, and games, which easily garnered media attention (print, film, TV), today's mass art producers must compete for attention with TikTok stars, social media influencers, creatives, as well as mass art consumers' personalized material. Our attention economy demands ever more attention, yet attention is not only in short supply, but it's a fixed quantity, not an infinite source, that is quite literally spread across 6 billion people's screens (73% of the world's population as of October 2025)(Petroysan 2025).

While popular culture appears to have gone extinct; mass art as we know it will flourish until human beings go extinct. The next frontier will be finding ways to prevent artificial intelligence from producing cultural products, not because they will be terrible, undesirable, or fake, but because quite frankly, the *culture-making process* engenders human flourishing.

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