

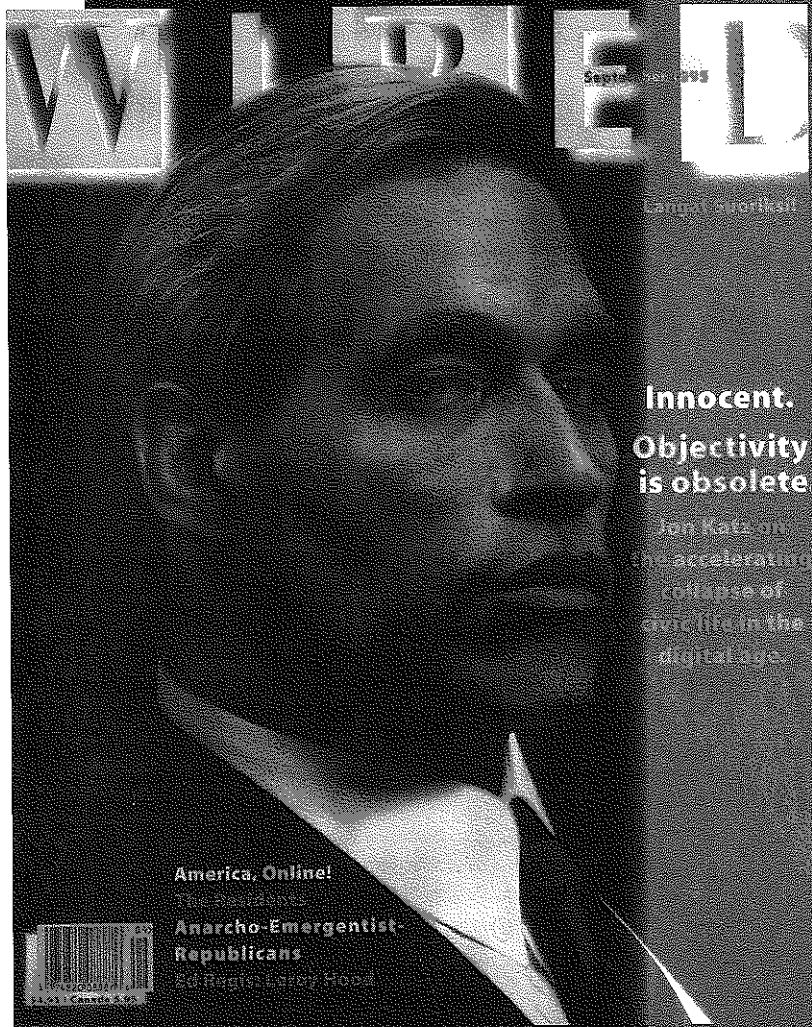
Morphing Sucks

The Unbearable Lightness and Goofiness of Morphing

by **Steven Whittaker**

Morphing disheartens me. What? Am I squeamish of cybernetic permeation?

Stay tuned. To me. And to TV. Note the current ad fad in which images seamlessly change, or morph, into other images. An ad for razors shows a series of faces, each dissolving into the next. Another ad shows a video-game enthusiast's face morphing into various goofy discombobulations. In an ad for a nasal spray a man morphs into a six-foot nose, which the product then morphs back into his body. Let those images be a ductile muffler around your senses. Muffler morphs to a python, tightens. Python loosens to a tea cozy, then eats the dead sensorium



Innocent.
Objectivity
is obsolete

Jon Katz on
the accelerating
collapse of
civil life in the
digital age.

America, Online!
The Residents
**Anarcho-Emergentist-
Republicans**
Ed Regis: Larry Hood



What's wrong with morphing? Morphing is goofy. What's so bad about goofiness? Its spastic exuberance exceeds its own content. Goofiness is the reverse of diffidence. The goofy face is plastic and sorry it is plastic all at once. It mimics *and* it defers to an original face of composure it despairs of assuming. So it is angry — all that genuflecting.

Goofiness is kiss-ass rage. It is an expression of conciliation-through-self-discomposure. "Yuk, yuk, I'm innocuous," says the goofy face, meaning, "Don't hurt me." Goofiness tucks its already receding chin into its collar, and raises its eyebrows ingratiatingly towards its hairline. It bends over backwards to apologize for its goofy prostration.

But even as the goofy face genuflects, it is strangely aggressive. Take the dinosaur, Barney, of the children's show. This Pollyanna-saurus marshals a gaggle of kids through routines of niceness. Underlying his rictal grin and continuous nodding is an imperative of permanent FUN. Each of Barney's child actors wears, to steal a phrase from poet George Jonas, an absolute smile. Every potentially quiet moment is filled with Barney's gurgles and coos and yuks. Barney's producers are scared of the silences and composure you'll find in Mr Rogers who, all pedophile parodies aside, manages to be both sober and comforting when he advises children, "No one is happy *all* of the time."

The most understated excess of expression can make a face goofy, yet excess expression is the defining quality of our media. We are the live hosts of a goofy culture. Goofiness invites us not to respond in an adequate way to considered context, but to react with a zany self-immolation that implies any response would be inadequate. Goofiness both expresses and incites despair. It's even worse when a face achieves its goofiness with the help of morph technology, for then it lacks even the minimal dignity of the face which immolates itself. The morphed face has goofiness done to it!

Morphing makes matter itself seem goofy, for it becomes merely the servile medium of facile alteration. In the morph universe, a face becomes another face as easily as an automobile becomes a tiger, as easily as Ralph Klein becomes a bodhisattva. Morphing robs matter of its integrally grown form; it separates

that form from its material medium. It makes us accustomed to repetitive, trivial change.

When an image is morphed into another image, the metamorphosis is unlike any transformation occurring in nature. Morphing effects a *lateral transformation*. It takes one realized form, posits it as starting point, and designates another form as destination, "realizing" or making explicit the inferred intermediary forms along the way. Thus, the car becomes a tiger, and, less tenable still, Michael Jackson becomes a black panther (in his video for "Black and White").

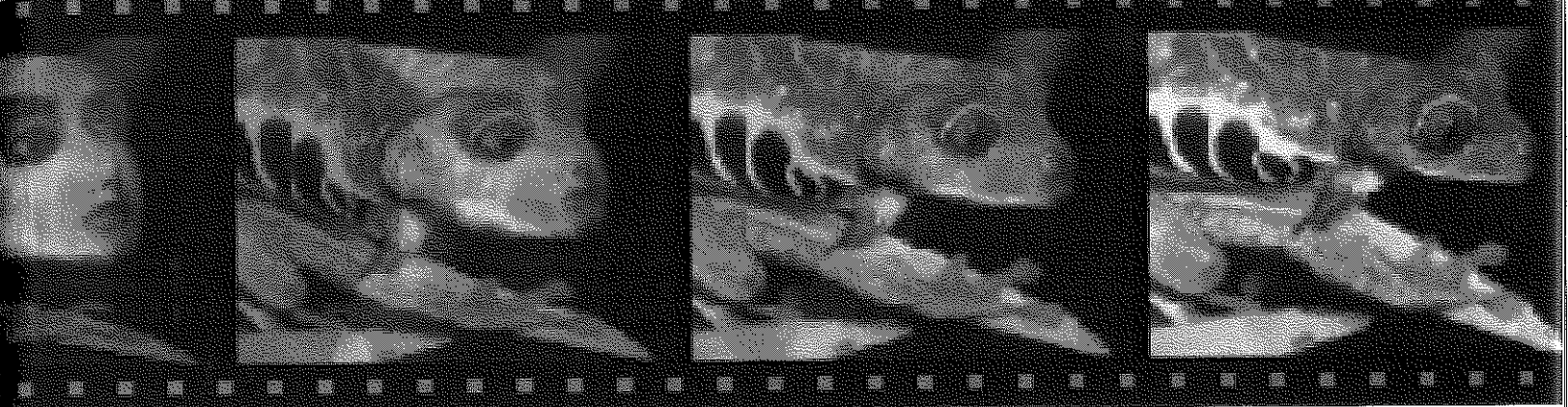
The lateral transformations that morphing effects between images insult the changes in nature. Think of the shaggy-mane mushroom. This soft fungus can breach asphalt and in the course of one day end up standing a foot tall. Try to imagine the essence of that growth, and place it next to what happens in a morph event. The growth of a shaggy-mane describes the formal organic parry of live matter meeting inert resistant matter, and the organism's winning integral thrust. Reaching its full height, the fungus's fruiting body melts into an amorphous soup to spread its spores. It has grown through a penetrating formal integrity to a formless mass in a matter of hours — a testimony to the substance of organic matter.

The awe of the organic is that it is *one* — but one becoming complex, *organizing*, and reproducing; growing out of itself while remaining itself; and preserving in its nuclei a record of and code for its own development.

This is all foreign to morphing's alteration, which synthesizes form out of the material world, and then leaches a made dynamism back into that dematerialized form. This is the reason that morphing's finessed continuities and hybrid versimilitudes are unsuitable for tracing the most mundane transcendences happening in nature.

The transformation that happens in organic growth, as well as in thinking, refers to a centre and a context simultaneously. In the case of a cell, there is individuation; at the same time there is cooperation in the context organism. In the case of thought, or at least self-critical thought, analysis serves the synthesis that depends on it, and which itself redefines the terms and context of analysis.

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Morphing makes for a graphic contrast. It extracts images from their context and "grows" them into other images. But the growth is malignant because it returns nothing to its nutrient organism, which was its context. Computer-morphing is the inverse of morphogenesis. Morphogenesis is life-forming and re-forms its substance. It is life-differentiating and -organizing in the same impulsion. Morphing, by comparison, is goofy, cancerous change, a lateral merging of the tissue of images that does not own up to all that is necessary in its made-ness.

What we've got now are oncomedia [onco = bulk, mass], one of which is called morphing. Morphing's fluid, lateral realizations of change depend on nature for attaining distinct forms in the first place, and on the intensive technical culture from other agents, which the morph ad or morph software represents. Our senses have the dubious honour of witnessing the graphics of cybernetic metastasis.

The idea of lateral transformation applies not only to morphing proper, but also to the myriad trivial changes with which our commodity culture distracts us from the possibility of actual change. The morphomania we find in popular culture is fundamentally conservative. Look at Transformers. They are toys that change, but consider their narrow vector of the metamorphosis – from tank to deadly robot. A weapon becomes a humanoid weapon. The ghost in the machine grows more ghoulish. Or think of the TV show "Super Morphin' Power Rangers." I suffered through an episode in which the team of teens morphs into savvy machine dinosaurs, which then organize into a single robot. They do this to rescue a distinctly goofy leprechaun from a malevolent witch. A whole lotta change, going nowhere fast – that's the goofy *Zeitgeist* of the morpher.

It is tempting to focus on the idea of the capitalist-as-abstract-agent, and to accuse that figure of blithe, ruthless action. I could then argue that those who buy Morph or MorphWizard software suffer morph envy of capital's fluidity. Capital may be the only tangible image we retain to function in place of Aristotle's unmoved mover, that stable agent at the centre or periphery of things who impels all appetite, motion, and growth, while remaining still. As Terry Eagleton comments, "Both capitalist and capital are images of the living dead, the one animate yet anaesthetized, the other inanimate yet active."

When we buy the myth that we are unmorphed morphers, do we become the dully alive or the antic dead? A goofy hybrid of both? How do we subtly redefine and mediate our sense of responsibility when we are subjected to the deadening hyperactivity of morphing?

Steven Williams, morph foreman at state-of-the-art morph manufacturer Industrial Light & Magic, which produced the special effects for films such as *The Abyss* and *Terminator 2*, says, "We have conquered the physical laws of nature. We can do tree bark; we can do grass blowing and water rippling." *Time* enthuses that we can look forward to "flights of fancy so realistic that audiences won't ever suspect they're seeing an act of industrial imagination."

An object's nature, its arduous immanence, is irrelevant to the equation during the humanly organized technique of morphing, in which images meet pure torque of will. This is something other than cultivation. We are manufacturing a culture that no longer thinks cultivation a worthwhile, practical metaphor. Cultivation seems just a waste of time when you can simply "do nature."

Commodity culture makes everyone an aristocrat, or at least a manager. With the help of your own home version of Morph Software, it has finally democratized and finessed the means to indulge (read: exacerbate) your appetite for the new. Morph Software promises you infinite jurisdiction over matter. Everyone's an individual, but managing the same range of products and now doing the same morphs.

A chameleon changes colour as it descends from a plant. Natural enough. But as it walks across a telephone, a replica of the dial and numbers morphs on its back. It seems sort of real. . . but you know it isn't. The ad is for a telecommunications company asserting how adaptive it can be in billing you, the client. It will be as servile to you as this chameleon's image is to it. The ad concludes, "After all, when it comes to business, you'd better be able to *change*."

Another ad poses even more problems, because of its positive ecological message. Promoting the value of trees and tree-planting in Canada, the ad features a real tree that seems, through the application of morph technology, to breathe. This medium undermines

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the message. The adulterated tree gives the lie to the message of cultivation. The ad kowtows to a culture become incapable of imagining *non-appetitive* immediacy. It offers a tree made goofy with accelerated, anthropomorphed breathing, as if this helps us better understand our dependence on trees.

The idea of a world of supple matter isn't new. Stories of the Buddha's birth tell of lotus leaves springing up to receive his foot-fall, and of the ground adapting to meet his feet with a Birkenstock fit. Another story recounts a priest who admonishes a Hindu ascetic who is reclining in the temple with feet propped on a sacred lingam. The ascetic asks the priest to help him place his feet where there is no lingam, but when the priest tries, every time he moves the man's feet, a lingam springs from the ground to receive them. Meanwhile, a hemisphere and a couple of millenia away, the kneeling St. Theresa of Avila prays with such devotion that she levitates, and the burliest of her Sisters can't pin her to the prayer mat.

In all these cases, matter curtsies for someone who has, through one form of arduous immanent transcendence or another, gained a spiritual pedigree. In contrast, we mongrels of abstraction also want the lotus and the lingam underfoot, but we want them supple to whim rather than worthiness; thus, we lack proof our whim is worthy.

In morphing, one transformation is as plausible as the next. Why is this? Scientific modernity has finally commodified its break with the traditional Western belief in what one conservative theorist called the "infinite continuance of God." This break, though, was by no means a clean one. Morphing gives an indication why. In morphing, scientific modernity commodifies and makes graphic its own belief in a quantifiable equivalence of, or a mediated elision between, things.

This equivalence or elision replaces the former "continuance of God." Or rather, that continuance is now concentrated so that it fits inside an event of change, rather than overarching that change as it did before. Morphing reveals technocratic modernity valorizing a change that turns out to be a highly resolved continuance between this stasis and that. Like Odo, the morphing security officer on "Deep Space 9," this pseudo-change protects the status quo from the threat of real — that is, socially rather than technically achieved — change.

Morph software permits the individual — you, in the privacy of your own home! — as one reviewer says, "to get in on the fusing fun." Confirm your own unmorphed individualism by blurring the individuality of any other naturally or technologically attained form. Move the world on your joystick. You, the unmorphed morpher, are free to "realize" any change. Why honour the history of self-transcending form, recorded in each and every instance of life? Merely move the cursor and that magnified amoeba becomes your limousine. Morph a face into another face or a tumour into an angel: it's

all the same. "Why did you stop to morph the rose?" "Uh, I no longer quite believed it was there."

CNN's motto, "Capturing history, moment by moment," sums up morph culture's view of history as a series of segues. News must be new, momentous, goofy. Zoom in, pan out, move on. Pause. See the Bangkok brothel child. She has calluses that morph into petals.

Morphing decontextualizes its objects, but it is not a medium for thoughtful context-breaking. It reinforces an idea of change as mere exchange of one thing for another, instead of change as identity-preserving growth.

Even the biologist studying cellular growth knows that the essence of organic change is not summed up in the static slices of structure she necessarily isolates. The essence of growth is in how each "stage" produces the next one out of itself, as it in turn unfolded out of a previous stability. The biologist knows that the growing eludes her, even as she tries to fill in the blanks between each "snapshot" within the process. By contrast, morphing implies change is exhausted by that elision which fills in the blank between decontextualized points of stasis. Morphing "naturalizes" by reifying, in high-resolution, that blank between-space of the lateral alteration. Morphing commodifies pretend change.

Did you ever feel a dull dread in your only functioning lung and realize suddenly that all the plants in the room are plastic? Did you ever eat ashes unknowingly? Did you ever recognize a face that then turned into a footstool? In my aesthetic, morphing is like that. In other words, morphing sucks.

