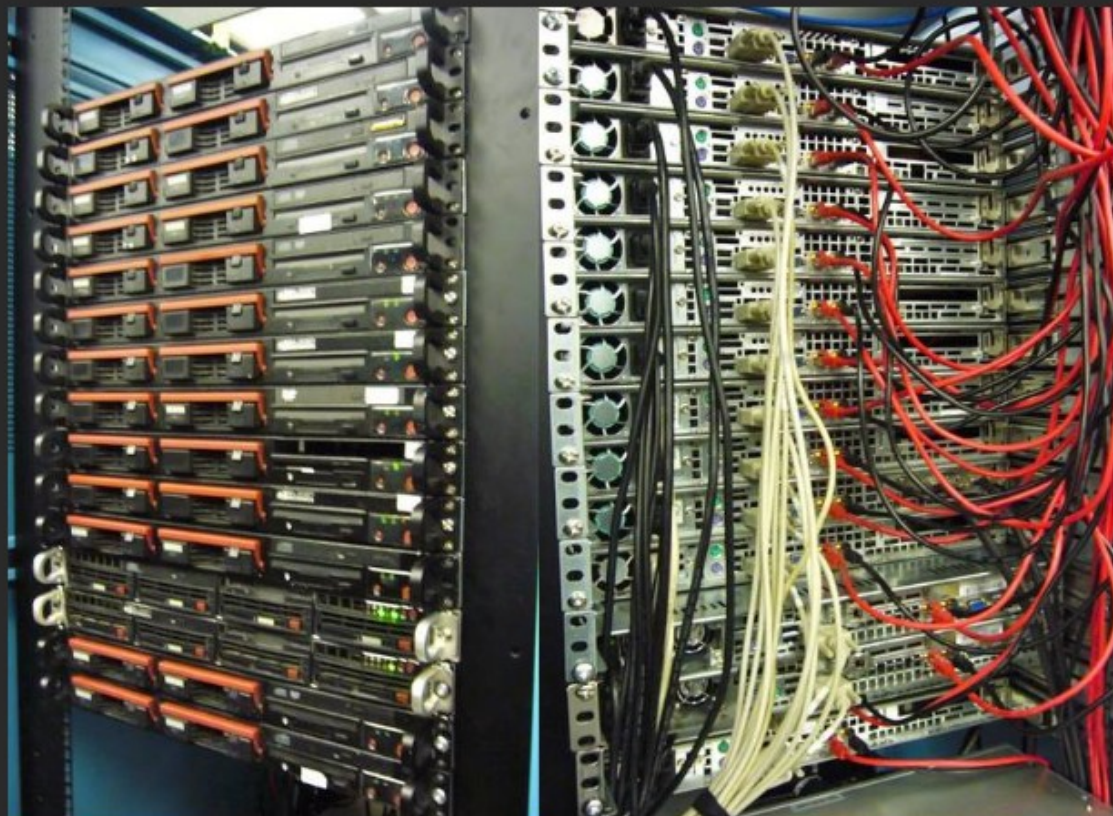


^Z

Ctrl-ZINE



Issue 21 - Vol 2

About ^Z

Ctrl-ZINE (^Z) is a Ctrl-c.club/Smol Web collaborative zine that celebrates tech and the Smol Web. Started in March 2023, Ctrl-ZINE publishes a monthly issue, where anyone can download a PDF version and a pre-folded PDF version for home printing. No digital format of the content is maintained on a Website whatsoever. Some of the topics within these issues range from Smol Web protocols and communities (ActivityPub, Tildeverse), Web-adjacent protocols (Gopher, Gemini), alternative forms of communication (HAM radio, LoRa, finger), snippets of code, artwork, and anything tech-related that is an expression of self.

Those who contribute to ^Z are passionate about what they share. They want what is best for Us, the citizens of the Web. With that, anyone with that same passion is welcome and encouraged to contribute to future issues. Further info can be found in the Editorial section of this issue. May the Smol Web live forever!

Editorial:

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ZINEHEAD Press

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Fighting AI with AI by ~loghead

AI bots, data sifting, intellectual property theft - what is one to do? Besides a re-remedied approach to *being* online (e.g. keeping a presence online, but one that serves one's self, and also with one's circle of friends as the consumer of one's blog posts, photos, videos, etc - (less "stranger friends")), there are still large amounts of "AI defense" to consider for those visiting a site not in the human form. The goal being: to prevent as much loss of privacy (as that, itself, is a thing being stolen) from the AI crawlers. A cutting of losses, of course, but also ending the bleed of data to the machines.

*[Also of note (to myself): don't hesitate to download gratuitously - **take the web with me!** Relevant links, videos, music, movies, shows, books, make a personal repository of media I like, and have a personal Web of my own.]*

Ok back to it, while looking at my links.txt file, and seeing [Nightshade](#) (that bastardizes what AI sees when it comes across an image - rendering the "scraping"/theft of that image useless (what it will see/take will not be the image on-screen)), and also [the AI/LLM user agents blocking guide](#), I get to thinking: "**is there a way to authentically fight AI *with* AI?**"

Those familiar with AI, one could probably make a list of things an AI bot does to gather (steal) data from a website, and not just "block" or "distort" what is there, but "offer" (as a false promise - a red herring) to the AI scraping the site an *entirely* different site than what is actually there.

robots.txt sort of does this. Opting out of search engines crawling a site, but, it does *not* (proactively) put into place a page or series of pages that are "bogus".

Another thing to consider, what starts and stops an AI bot from crawling a Website? What if it starts to crawl a page, and gets 100+ pages of little to no new/useful content? Say, a smattering of plaintext files page after page. Is there a safeguard triggered by the AI to tell ("itself") "hey, there's nothing new/useful on this site - go to next "relevant" page or new site?" Or what about a LLM (large language model's) methods and protocols for crawling

a site? Is there a way to cause an "infinite loop" for an AI bot? A bot (or bots) crawl a page, and they just see more and more "useful" information, and then this site, the site having data stolen from it, creates a (Web) environment where the bot does not leave that site/service? Forever thinking it is getting new and useful information, just to be "stuck" on that site for an indefinite period of time. Sort of an AI trap? Can we overload data centers with redundant junk repetitively scraped by AI?

It reminds me of the pod creatures that attack clams. They latch onto the top of a clam, and they grind and dig at the top of the shell in an attempt to eat the meat inside. Some clams, will actually die of what amounts to cardiac arrest because of this, knowing they may well be eaten alive. But, these clams also have a "fuck you" response when this is happening. They stick out their small tentacles, those which they use to create a "thread" to the ocean floor (which allows a clam to stay in one spot, not be carried away by undercurrents), and attach multiple threads to the pod creature attempting to drill into it's shell. Multiple threads, one side on the back of the creature, the other end on the ocean floor. The pod creature gets its meal, but eventually dies of starvation atop the empty shell of the clam that had sealed it's fate the meal before.

With enough familiarity of LLM's, and the *way* they crawl a site, and how and what an LLM finds useful, or relevant, once it starts to collect it's information - be it a person, site, blog, small service - could create a way to not bastardize a photo or a paragraph, and not just cause the AI to hallucinate, but hijack the crawlers course of scraping, themselves. Make the AI think it's got a nice, juicy wealth of information, to find itself just consuming, re-consuming, and link-bouncing again and always on the same site.

Of course it seems fanciful, as this may or may not be how AI and scrapers actually work, but to fill a petabyte in a data center somewhere, that amounts to nothing more than the same repetitive

and unoriginal data, makes me think this could be a prank hack of the century.

The Hum of Doing *by ~mindhunter*

Ever since my departure from institutions of formal learning, my concern for academics had slowly waned and withered. I have not met anyone who likes examinations or assessments, not even those who excel in them. It is almost unanimously perceived as tedious and even the best of students would likely prefer another mode of evaluation.

Despite its shortsightedness and its attempt to reduce students to a quantitative measure, examinations still remain as the prevalent means through which we judge qualification and merit. Although I have reached a point in my life where I wouldn't have to take any more of these, at least within the confines of academics, it still bothers me in some ways.

It was evident that this abiding concern had only little to do with the distress academia had caused me. In a test, I had always felt that I was constantly put in a position to prove my worth. To justify what pragmatic utility my existence had ultimately served. As much as everyone would agree such quantitative measures are woefully inadequate at even judging a phenomenon, let alone a person, we are still forced to contrive one out of necessity. Only numbers and magnitudes can inform action. And given the fact that we exist within a culture that views dissent from ceaseless doing as failure, we strive to be engaged. To compete and out do each other in whatever ways that are presented to us.

Academic evaluation remains as a thorn on my side because in some sense it revealed a dangerous tendency that I have since observed everywhere. The obsession of means over ends. Examinations and by extension even the entire educational edifice exists to enlighten individuals. And any numerical quantity is only meaningful in so far it measures what it intends to. But within academia, I could

observe that any quantitative measure which is supposed to be nothing more than a symbol of knowledge appeared to take a life of its own. And as the symbol became increasingly detached from what it signified, it only referenced itself. So every pursuit within academia, became to me, a pursuit of quantity. A relentless attempt to conquer and relish what is ultimately a hollow symbol at the expense of true knowledge.

I had for a very long time accepted this as normalcy until my hiatus from institutions. Being in a position, for the first time, to reflect clearly I soon realized how fundamentally rotten and soulless the process of learning I had hitherto adopted truly was. But I also observed that this seemingly isolated problem pervaded almost all facets of life. I could see the far reaching influence of such hollow symbols everywhere from science to politics. The pursuit of truth which had once been the heart of scientific movements became subordinate to the necessity of application. Political ideologies which served to remind us of perennial values are now mere pretext to wield wealth and power.

Every human endeavor, every decision and mode of thought ultimately became enslaved to the deafening hum of doing. It no longer mattered to anyone "why" one must do but rather "how" well you can do it. As I struggled to place myself in this world, pursuing interests and desires which had always emphasized the why, I found myself invariably drowned by the ceaseless motion of the world around me. The means and methods we had devised to make life better have now paradoxically possessed it. Movement is now the primary preoccupation of life and all that matters is your contribution to the endless march of civilization. Swept by the tide of progress and the usurpation of means over ends, we are left chasing hollow symbols as we become hollow ourselves.

The AI Hype by ~mindhunter

In a previous blog of mine on Linux, I talk about how the commonplace ignorance towards technology is becoming more detrimental with each day. This is an idea that one of my favourite writers Niel Stepehnson introduced in his essay "In the Beginning was the Command Line". To provide a brief summary, the essay outlines the development of major operating systems and reflects on how since the inception of the "GUI", end users have come to increasingly relinquish the control they have over computers. Ease of use always entails a certain amount of ignorance and sometimes it is warranted. But when this interface, which is supposed to facilitate unmitigated communication, falsifies or subtly leads you towards performing a specific task, it becomes something else entirely.

I have found this frame of reference extremely useful in discerning between good and bad software. If a particular program strives to be transparent and fulfills its task as effectively as possible, I usually consider it well written. Recently I have been exposed to a fair bit of discourse surrounding AI which prompted me to evaluate it along these lines. While some regard the technology to be revolutionary, others dismiss it altogether on the basis of describing AI to be nothing more than a glorified autocomplete.

I personally err towards the latter side of the debate for both personal and general reasons. In my experience using AI, properly called LLM, I have found it useful in certain respects. It can rearrange text quite efficiently and might even be useful for looking up syntax or documentation for commands. But when you engage the LLM with more sophisticated tasks, even if it is strictly confined to programming, it is needless to say that it fails rather miserably. This limitation of LLMs and its inability to generalize in any meaningful sense arises because LLMs do not understand. They simply predict the next word in a given prompt, creating a feeble illusion of intelligence that crumbles almost instantly with scrutiny.

I find this predictive nature of LLMs problematic for many reasons but mostly because of how it deceives someone of what it actually offers. As you enter a prompt in ChatGPT or Gemini, what you get

in response gives you all the impression of some rudimentary intelligence at work but the truth couldn't be farther from it. However there's an even more alarming concern. With the rise of "Vibe Coding" and the general practice of using LLMs to sidestep any serious writing, especially in Academia, this technology also appears to be fueling a culture of mediocrity.

Under the pretense of letting AI do all the "hard work", its users become increasingly detached from a particular task, settling either for sloppy code that just works or content that barely passes off as human. In the context of our interface analogy, its not just that AI throws a veil on the machine you use but rather on life itself as it removes you from fully engaging in pursuits that are of inherent value. Both in education and perhaps even in the world at large, AI is assuming the role of an interface for living in a culture that cares more about appearance and quantity than anything else.

A good tool is always marked by an ability to bring you closer to the work at hand. It doesn't just make things easier but also provides a conduit through which you can understand and derive lasting value from whatever you are doing. In our pursuit of seeking expedience, I believe we have reached a point where mindless work is being praised as technological breakthrough. And if it is anything that LLMs presage, it is our credulity to unthinkingly accept any novel innovation in the name of progress.

How to handcraft graphics for the small web *by ~nttp*

If there's one signature trait of the small web, that's handcrafted HTML. Not everyone does it, but it's a point of pride for many practitioners. There's just one problem with that: HTML by definition is all about text.

Or is it? As it turns out, the modern web has an answer to that: inline SVG. I like vector graphics because you can tell the computer, "here's a blue box, there's a red circle and on top of them it says 'geometry' in big letters". I prefer this way of thinking about art; it's not just splotches of color.

I like SVG because you can turn an image description into code much the same way you'd write a web page (in fact it's also a web standard). As it turns out, modern browsers let you mix the two freely and have web pages that are part text and part graphical as if it was the most natural thing:

```
html
<!DOCTYPE html>
<meta charset="utf-8">
<title>My first webpage</title>

<p>Hello, world!</p>

<svg>
  <rect x="10" y="10" width="100" height="100"/>
</svg>
```

That's really all you need to get started. Not going to write a tutorial here, of course; try the Pocket Guide to Writing SVG, by Joni Trythall. Just let me point out an obvious question for us tilde users: what if you want to look at your oh-so-graphical web page in Lynx?

Turns out, each drawing can have a `<title>` and/or `<desc>` element right at the start; the title is shown as a tooltip in graphical browsers, while the description is shown as alt text in all the others. Yep... Lynx and its cousins are SVG-aware and do what you would expect of them. They're not throwbacks!

Even better, each group of shapes in a drawing (the `<g>` element) can have its own title and description; arranged in a suitable

order, they can show as a nice detailed explanation when viewed in a terminal emulator for example.

Mostly, to me it's about having two languages in one, therefore twice as many ways to express myself online. The web just got that much more awesome.

The only downside far as I can tell is that you can't select inline SVG, or right-click and save it: something to keep in mind. On the other hand, you can have links in an embedded drawing. Not so much when using the `` element. Mix and match as needed.

CLASSI-SITES

(interesting links)

puter.com *(a computer, in the web browser)*

langworth.com *(LTERM, someone's site in cli form)*

internetphonebook.net *(dial up a blog, visit blog, win)*

browserpad.org *(note-taking in the web browser)*

infinitemac.org *(all old macOS versions, in-browser)*

POSTS

daily news from a dot matrix printer -

<https://aschmelyun.com/blog/getting-my-daily-news-from-a-dot-matrix-printer/>

The PISS Files (90s hacking zine) -

<http://web.textfiles.com/eazines/PISS/>

cDc textfiles (cultdeadcow textfiles) -

https://cultdeadcow.com/cDc_files/

Building a personal archive of the web, the slow way -

<https://alexwlchan.net/2025/personal-archive-of-the-web/>

The small things Manifesto -

<https://ajroach42.com/the-small-things-manifesto/>