

The Butterfly Effect / Rules Set You Free

By Jacob Ciocchi



Paper Rad, 2006. Photo: Andrew Jeffrey Wright

Whistlegraph is a group of artists and performers consisting of Jeffrey Alan Scudder, Alex Freundlich, and Camille Klein. My first exposure to their work was on Instagram (probably a re-post from TikTok), in mid-2020. It was a short POV clip of a hand drawing a doodle, while someone else sang along off-screen. The singing synced perfectly with the mark-making of the doodle, and the marks matched the singing. You could tell the drawing and singing were rehearsed, although the video also had a casual, improvised feel. The effect was that it felt like the song couldn't be separated from the doodle, and vice versa. After I watched this video, my first thought was this way of embedding a song into a doodle was like a very low-tech way of making "visual music," a form of animation pioneered by Oskar Fischinger in the 1930s' that we now associate with iTunes visualizers and VJ sets in the 21st century. But this version of visual music somehow made sense within the participatory, persona-as-brand-based context of social media.

If you stretch your mind a bit, you can think of the techniques or rules for whistlegraphing as a kind of analog piece of painting software (Jeffrey also creates his own digital painting and drawing software). Like any software, it has an interface, with a set of instructions (or limitations) that force a specific kind of creative engagement from its user, which result in a specific kind of output. The best example I can think of is to compare whistlegraphs to early digital painting software like MS Paint or KidPix (which Jeffrey made a short documentary about) in that the limitations of these pieces of software were so great that they forced their users to make images in an entirely new way. Similarly, the rules of Whistlegraph force its practitioners to make radically different visual and auditory decisions than they would if they were using a piece of audiovisual software like Adobe Premiere.

While pre-dating internet art, this kind of idea has its roots in the conceptual painting practices of Sol LeWitt, or the instruction-based pieces of Yoko Ono or John Cage. Whistlegraph could also be seen as related to DIY video synthesis pioneers like Dan Sandin, for whom the making (and philosophy behind the making) of the electronic device is equal if not more important than the artwork made on the device. And, of course, whistlegraphing relates to the legacy of drawing games: both the kind kids do for fun, and the kind adults do (the Surrealist's exquisite corpse game comes to mind, for example). To overly generalize and lump together all of these artists' methods and/or games into one idea: it is not the result that makes the art engaging, so much as choosing to accept the customized system that generates such results, aka choosing to play by the rules of the game.

The Whistlegraph TikTok account has over 2 million followers, which means that Whistlegraph are mid-level TikTok influencers. However, as far as I know, they are the only TikTok influencers who also have identities within the realms of new media art (as defined by the art world and/or academia). In this way, they are a triumphantly popular new media art project. In doing research for this essay, I found a person who has a whistlegraph tattooed onto their body, which is a kind of influence that exists outside of likes, impressions, or follower count. How did this happen?

Between 2000 and 2008, I was in my own new media art collective called Paper Rad (consisting of myself, my sister Jessica Ciocci, and Ben Jones), who similarly influenced other young people to ink tattoos of our doodles permanently into their flesh. The doodle I am thinking of was drawn by Ben, and was a doodle of dolphins connected to one another in such a way that their bodies spelled out the word "GAY."

Paper Rad worked in a variety of mediums like websites, digital animation, hacked video game cartridges, and zines, all of which had a unified aesthetic or "house style." This style can be loosely described as brightly colored, home-made, over-stimulating, exuberantly energetic, and filled with references to popular culture of the recent past. We went on to make art shows, books and DVDs, gaining recognition within more established and well-respected venues.

Our neon, maximalist, lo-fi computer and appropriated cartoon aesthetic became, for a short time, a part of the zeitgeist for other young, underground/DIY new media artists, indie comics-makers, noise musicians, and even some young actors/comedians (I recently learned that Kyle Mooney of SNL was a big Paper Rad fan at the time).

Why did so many people like Paper Rad? I think it was because we were five years ahead of the curve in terms of adopting the Internet as the primary space for cultivating youth culture. While Paper Rad predated the social media era, we were nonetheless known for our "feed" – a constant stream of output – found on the central hub of our impossible-to-navigate, maze-like website. Our impulse was always to flood the system, rather than curate for the sake of clarity. Individually, each work felt like a trading card within a bigger series, which, when stitched together or seen as a whole, seemed important (perhaps the entirety of our output was our masterpiece, rather than any individual work).

For this reason, many people have said over the past 20 years that Paper Rad was very "influential" for other young artists, especially those interested in digital culture. But I always wonder what that word "influential" means in the case of Paper Rad.

For one thing: I was on the inside looking out, so my view was distorted. I remember that our peers started coming to our events dressing more and more like the way we dressed, but that fashion trend faded away pretty quickly. Today, I struggle to find easy-to-point-to examples of Paper Rad's lasting impact, perhaps because many of the methods and ideas that made us groundbreaking have simply become the status quo for anyone making art in the social media era.

Why is the concept of influence so important to a collective like Paper Rad or Whistlegraph?

The young digital artist is different from the traditional young gallery artist. If you are a young gallery artist with success, it means that other artists recognize your work, and that other galleries, dealers, a few collectors, and some writers are following what you are doing. I am going to say that – at maximum – this is around 1,000 people that have seen your work and retained your name (at openings and online) and around 100-to-200 people actively invested in the work, or influenced by the work. But at the end of the day, your context is clear: you are an artist in the art world; that is your job. On the other hand, if a young digital artist has success online it means that many more thousands of people have seen your work, but the rest is a mystery. Many of your online followers may not even necessarily think of your content as art in the first place. In addition to this vast, confusing network of users, you may also manage to have 100-to-200 art world people telling you that what you are doing is definitely art. To summarize: the context and markers of success for the young digital artist are vague and ever-changing, with influence being one of the few currencies that seems constant. You are getting a lot of likes and people are talking, but can that be considered a job? Do you even want a job?

As a way to grapple with this confusion, I have developed a belief in perhaps a more "new age" understanding of influence, as it pertains to internet art collectives. There is of course direct influence, which is based on the teacher/student relationship. But the harder to define and more interesting version of influence is indirect influence. In this version, an artist or artist's group creates a model or system for making work that is exciting, contagious, and inclusive, which then opens a door for other artists to walk through - either in the present or in the future, knowingly or unknowingly.

In 2015, I was a visiting professor of new media art at Oberlin College, having transferred my credentials as an indirect influencer into a direct influencer. Part of my job was keeping up with whatever was going on in contemporary art, which was partly why I originally followed Jeffrey on Instagram. He was doing these strange lectures/performances in college classrooms where he would simply draw on a whiteboard using some kind of arbitrary set of guidelines, while he talked about computers and philosophy.

What I liked about his work at the time was both how deeply invested it was in the legacy of New Media Art from an academic perspective, as well as how completely absurd it was. Jeffrey was basically proposing that the "new media artist" was not fundamentally an artist who uses computers to make art, but was, instead, one who builds a unique or custom set of rules or instructions, which are then either implemented by themselves or any other artist. I invited Jeffrey to do a lecture (for my Digital Painting class). One of my students that attended the lecture was Alex Freundlich.

Despite being a Gen-Z digital/social media native, Alex was insatiably curious, obsessed, mystified, even "dumbfounded" by the Internet's complexity. This is exactly how I felt when I discovered the web as an Oberlin art student roughly 20 years earlier.

Once I learned that Alex had been collaborating with Jeffrey on these new videos called "Whistlegraphs," soon to be joined by Camille Klein (who I know the least of the three), everything made sense. As a new media art project, Whistlegraph works because Jeffrey, Alex and Camille have created a contagious and inclusive new media art brand. Their version of new media art is different, yet indirectly influenced by the Paper Rad brand, updating and changing many of the methods that worked for us in the early 2000s', to methods that work in 2022.

Online culture is an endless set of quickly changing, fast-paced, interconnected systems. A few of these many systems are: the actual programmed algorithms that make up the platform, the legal rules that dictate what can and can't be done on the platform, as well as the unspoken rules for success within the platform. Whistlegraph, then, is an algorithm within an algorithm within an algorithm, or a set of instructions within a bigger set of instructions, which exists within an even bigger set of instructions, the biggest being simply "digital culture" as a whole. Tweens (arguably the target audience for Whistlegraph) take digital culture at face value and thus figure out how to give digital platforms meaning intuitively: they pick and choose which features to use and which are boring (which I like to call the "subversive tendency" of social media users, in my homemade version of art-speak).

If you were to think of Whistlegraph as a filter-as-piece of "analog software" that exists within TikTok - it is a virtual "challenge" with a painfully simple set of instructions, that is somehow still able to trick you into engaging over and over. Like any good game, its rules are simple but you keep coming back for more. And Whistlegraph is "cool," meaning its creators are in touch with emerging trends in music, fashion, art, and in general come off as culturally savvy.

Beyond the actual instructions of "how to make a Whistlegraph" there is also a Whistlegraph "house style" which functions as a second, equally important set of instructions for its users: an all-encompassing approach, a stance, a way of looking at the world. I hesitate to put this style into words, but feel the need to nonetheless: Whistlegraph TikToks feel funky, innocent, deceptively simple, healthy, goofy, heartfelt but also self-aware, and made with deep dedication. Similar to how slang, fashion, or other elements of persona-making combine to create the indefinable "vibe" of any given sub-culture, Whistlegraph is a set of instructions that allows one's creativity to be fully integrated into everyday life, rather than being siphoned off into "the artist's studio time." This is the power of the quick, well-rehearsed doodle, which graffiti taggers know very well. You don't have to set aside time to feel empowered creatively and publicly: you can do it within a few minutes, but you do have to practice your craft to gain respect within the community. Most social media platforms encourage a related kind of every day creativity: they privilege users who generate a constant stream of reliable content publicly (aka "the brand") rather than those who attempt to create infrequent but important masterpieces behind closed doors (aka the "the artist" from the 20th century, a concept that

we still mythologize despite it's relative unpopularity). Whistlegraphs showcase the group's unique take on what it means to make digital art, while at the same time "playing by the rules" of a giant social media platform (TikTok). Whistlegraph is a drawing game (or artist-created system) within a social media game (or company-created system) within an even bigger game called "digital culture", but you don't need to be aware of these power dynamics to appreciate it. A 12-year-old can understand why it's cool.

In fact: if I understand correctly, many of Whistlegraph's fans are younger, barely in their teens. This makes sense to me, as the spirit of the collective seems to have something to do with freedom, of breaking out of complex systems for image-making (including self-image making online) in favor of an absurdly simple one. Paper Rad fans, on the other hand, were mostly 18 to 30 in age, but we as artists were all obsessed with our own childhood years. Looking back on it, we were a group of artists trying to come to terms with the strange, wild spirit of our childhoods as young adults. We had our own "house drawing game," based off of a game we played as kids, that involved someone proclaiming the name of a famous cartoon character (for example "Papa Smurf") which the rest of us would then try our best to draw from memory. It is very challenging to conjure the correct formula, or system of lines, that best correlate to the copyrighted version of any famous cartoon character. Any inaccuracy creates a mountain of dissonance, which becomes the joy and meaning of the game. I was once playing a similar game with the artist Barry McGee and he referred to this kind of derivative image-making as "unlocking," which to me resonates with the group's concept of how whistlegraphs are not drawn but "manifested."

Many of Jeffrey's unique ways of thinking about digital media are delivered in what I would call his far-out, Professor-as-Guru persona. What Alex and Camille bring to the table (this is 100% my theory, as I have never talked to them about this) I think is the persona of "the cool students," which balance everything out. These of course are characters (not the actual real Alex, Camille, and Jeffrey) as TikTok demands its users to perform a character even more than other social media platforms.

Similar to Paper Rad, there is something more energizing about the idea of three young people fully immersed in a wacky, all-consuming worldview, rather than just one person. A crew is cooler than an individual because it feels like you, as the user, can perhaps become a part of the scene. The fact that they all lived in a house together (dare I say perhaps the coolest "hype house" ever?), building this eccentric ecosystem of lingo, art ideas, and fashion on an informal and daily basis (thus merging art into life like their hippie-art Fluxus great-grandparents) only helps to strengthen the myth created by their online output.

Projects like Paper Rad and Whistlegraph thus can be thought of as long, complex, multi-year, custom artist-generated systems (softwares?): they are an interlocking set of methods, approaches, aesthetics, and ways of engaging with the world that in their moment feel fresh, subversive, and most importantly participatory. If your users or fans cannot engage or inhabit the world of your collective, I would argue your collective does not fit within this concept of collective-as-software that I just came up with, as your collective is not being "used."

Underground aesthetic systems like Paper Rad or Whistlegraph relate to digital culture by smoothly and subtly integrating into a young artist's daily life, like one of many patches that cover the back of a punk-style jean jacket, their impact, becoming inseparable from other forms of youth-based identity-making such as style, slang, music consumption, etc. This subtle integration often makes such projects hard to historicize, as the zeitgeist changes (and with it the meaning of such collectives). Ultimately, even the most influential of such creative systems fade away, morph into something else, or are completely erased, just like the computer-based algorithms that they function within. One day you open up TikTok and find your favorite account has completely disappeared out of the blue, almost like it never existed.