

Pop Culture Cats

Part Two - Top Cats in Cyberspace

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Photographs with captions by Harry Pointer

Cats on the Internet started in the early days of the millennium with “Caturday” on the 4chan.org message board featuring captioned cat pictures called “lolcat” in 2005, with the domain name, LOLcats.com registered June 14, 2006. “Lolcat” is a compound word using the acronym for “laugh out loud” (LOL) and the word “cat”. The lolcat combines a cat image with an intended humorous caption, sometimes written in broken English. Some of the more humorous ones use correct English. The lolcat prowled around cyberspace until 2007, when its popularity surged thanks to “I CAN HAZ CHEEZBURGER?” posting its first image January 11, 2007.

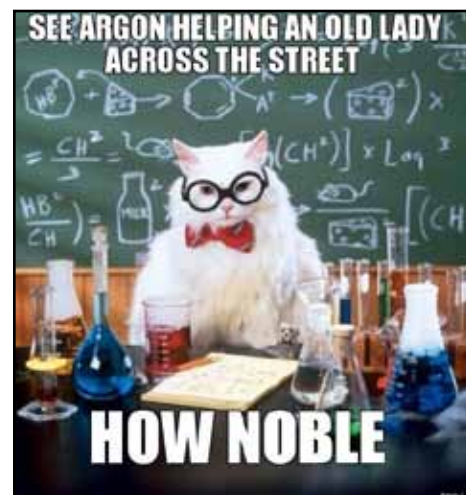
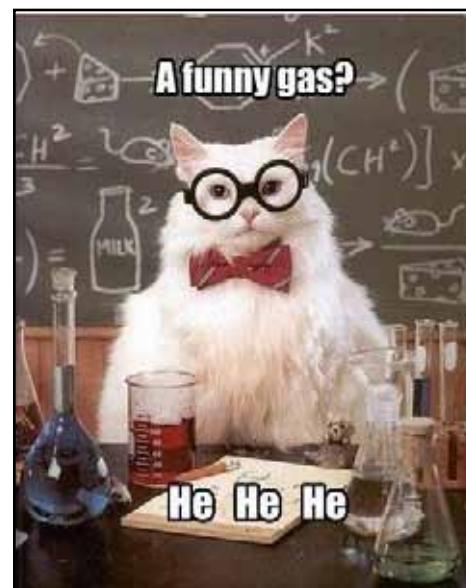
An Internet meme is an idea, style or usage that spreads quickly across the Internet often creating copycats. There are over 500,000 Internet cat memes according to the website Know Your Meme, which researches Internet memes and viral phenomena



Above: the original “ICanHasCheeseburger” meme with its first rebuttal (left)



A popular lolcat is Chemistry Cat meme, aka, Science Cat, which combines a professorial looking white cat attired in round black glasses and a red bowtie behind chemistry flasks and beakers with a series of chemistry jokes and puns primarily using the Periodic Table. For example, “Cats are composed of iron, lithium and neon. FeLiNe”



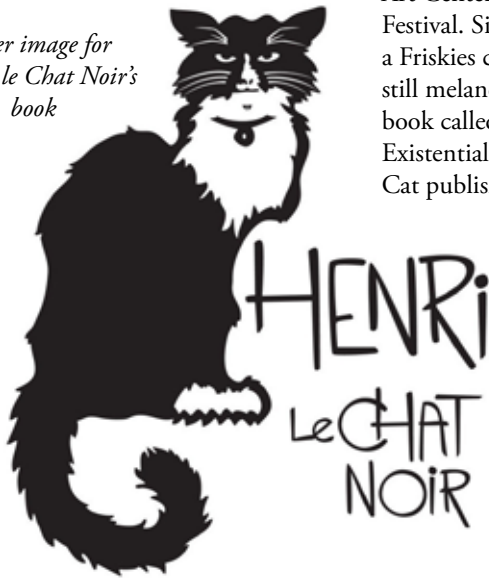
Above: Two “Chemistry Cat” memes.

The lolcat meme is one example of the Internet's feline obsession. YouTube, the largest video sharing site in the world, enables feline aficionados to upload and watch cat videos further feeding their addiction to the feline meme. YouTube may be the catalyst for cat videos going viral but the first cat video ever recorded was by Thomas Edison in 1894. The video is a staged 20-second clip of two cats wearing boxing gloves duking it out in a mini boxing ring.

In 2009, the Library of Congress digitized Edison's historical video and uploaded it on YouTube. (http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=6qre61opE_g)

Another precursor to today's cat video is an art film entitled, "The Meaning of Life" filmed by artist B. Wurtz in 1979. (vimeo.com/63113356#)

Cover image for *Henri, le Chat Noir's* book



The Internet has numerous "celebricats" and the number continues to grow. Maru, the Box Cat, a Scottish Fold (straight) from Japan has worldwide recognition as an Internet celebrity since 2009, with over 200 million views of his videos of him playing in a box. Keyboard Cat is a video of Fatso, an orange tabby dressed in a blue t-shirt playing an electronic keyboard. The original video is from 1984, and later uploaded to YouTube in June 2007, with over 32 million views. Other celebricats include Surprise Kitty, mom cat hugging kitten and Henri, le Chat Noir, the angst-filled feline philosopher, to name a few.

Henri, a tuxedo cat, appears in short videos created by William Braden with the first video, Henri, released May 27, 2007, and Henri 2, Paw De Deux in 2012. In 2012, Henri won the first Golden Kitty award for Best Cat Video on the Internet at the first-ever Walker Art Center's Internet Cat Video Film Festival. Since that award, Henri garnered a Friskies cat food commercial deal (he's still melancholic) and Braden wrote a book called, *Henri, le Chat Noir: The Existential Musings of an Angst-Filled Cat* published by Ten Speed Press.



Above: Maru, the Box Cat.



Grumpy Cat (below) and the first of her many memes

On August 28, 2013, the second Walker Art Center's Internet Cat Video Film Festival awarded the coveted Golden Kitty to Grumpy Cat; she's still unimpressed. With her perpetual frown, due to feline dwarfism, Grumpy Cat reigns as the current queen of feline memes. Real name Tardar Sauce, or Tard for short, has her own manager, scored a movie deal, wrote a New York Times best-seller, tours and makes television appearances. "Grumpuccino," anyone? Tabatha Bundesen, Tard's owner, reassures us that Tard is still her lovable sweet self and unaffected by the attention.



An audience of over 13,000 people gathered at Minnesota's State Fair to watch approximately 80 of the best cat videos from over 10,000 entries submitted from across the United States, Australia, Canada, Japan, Russia and the UK. Categories include Comedy, Drama, Foreign, Animated, Documentary and Cat-on-a-Stick, local Minnesota entries. An inaugural group of seven celebricats was inducted to the "Hall of Fame:" Maru, Keyboard Cat, Nyan Cat, Henri le Chat Noir, Kittens Inspired By Kittens, Boots and Cats and Lil BUB. Check the 2013-2014 schedule because curator, Scott Stulen, put the show on the road—January 24th: Milwaukee Art Museum, Milwaukee WI; May 2014: Great Wall of Oakland, Oakland CA; June 2014: Hollywood Theater, Portland, OR. If you can't attend a screening festival, see the video playlist here: <http://www.youtube.com/playlist?list=PL5aJYoXLOMo1K0vgy8XQfUKBaSVrj1ov7>

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Would the Internet exist if not for cats? Yes, of course, it would, but it wouldn't be nearly as much fun. According to the 2013-2014 APPA National Pet Owners Survey, there are over 95 million pet cats in the United States making them the largest number of pets so maybe it's only natural that cats rule the Internet, too. And make no mistake about it, cats do rule the Internet in the form of viral lolcat and videos featuring animals. Only music is more viral than the cutest kitten video, think PSY's Gangnam Style with over 1.76 billion views.

Internet cat memes, lolcats and cat videos are an international cyberspace phenomenon. But why cats? Theories range from the simple—given their aloof, ultra-cool reputation, cats are paradoxically funny—to the sociological—cats and humans have a 12,000-year-old symbiotic relationship. In a PBS interview, Ben Huh of the Cheezburger Network may have the best answer, "We have created weapons of mass cuteness. We've been doing it for 10,000 years and everybody's surprised: 'Oh my God I can't believe we love cats!' We biologically engineer them to be the object of our affections."



Could "Grumpy Cat" really be the Ghost in the Machine?