

Creating Authenticity in a Digital Era

In February 2021, a ten-year-old GIF meme, “Nyan Cat” was sold for approximately \$590,000 during an online auction for digital art (Business Insider). Behind the digital meme is Chris Torres, the creator of Nyan Cat, who originally uploaded it to YouTube as a three-and-half-minute video back in 2011. To celebrate the tenth anniversary of this famously beloved piece, Torres reformatted the video and released it on an NFT platform in 2021, which was later sold for 300 cryptocurrencies. As a visual image circulated on the internet for over ten years, the Nyan Cat has been seen, downloaded, owned, and manipulated by many. So how exactly could it still be sold? Also, why would someone pay such a high price to buy an intangible and dematerialized digital artwork?

In today’s backdrop of digitization, the materiality of media content is translated “into digital code, a language of ones and zeros” (Havens and Lotz) to “increase the accessibility of goods” and make “it easier for people to share resources” (Wilson). Excessive amounts of information are produced, transmitted, processed, and replicated daily so that abundance is closely associated with digitally created and spread content. Early internet pioneer John Perry Barlow raised a question in 1992 that “if our property can be infinitely reproduced and instantaneously distributed across the planet without cost, how are we going to protect it” (TED)? The introduction of NFTs (non-fungible tokens), which essentially are the “certificates of ownership registered on the blockchain for everyone to see” (Tehrani), provides some possible answers to the proposed question. This essay will use Nyan Cat’s NFT sale as a focal point to discuss how NFT grants authenticity and scarcity to media content in today’s context of mass digitization.

As previously introduced in the first paragraph, Nyan Cat is originally a YouTube video uploaded by Chris Torres in 2011. It quickly went viral and has accumulated around 193 million views to this day (Torres). To celebrate its ten-year success, Torres remastered the Nyan Cat as an NFT file and listed it on the platform Foundation on February 18th, 2021, for 3 ETH. After a few bidding rounds, an anonymous buyer won the bid the next day on February 19th and paid 300 ETH to own the 1400x1400, 12-framed NFT Nyan Cat (Nyan Cat). The closing price set another high bar in the NFT auction record. However, the NFT Nyan Cat GIF looks no different from the YouTube video or the ones that are already circulating on different platforms. So how exactly did NFT work in this case to distinguish a digital artwork that initially built its popularity by massive spread and repost from its wide-spread copies?

NFT is a set of programmings written inside of the codes of a digital file. It acts like an artist signature, an authentication certificate, and a future inventory record all in one. The moment when Torres created Nyan Cat's NFT file, it was already programmed to be a one-of-a-kind digital property backed up by NFT's non-fungible characteristic. The technology grants the authenticity and singularity of the file, and such assurance will carry on once it enters the public sphere. Eventually, only one person can own the NFT Nyan Cat piece, which endues an "irreplaceable status" and economic value to the work (Chayka). Even though the GIF, JPEG, or MP4 versions of the Nyan Cat can still be instantaneously reproduced and downloaded, the singular NFT file remains highly scarce. When the anonymous user paid 300 ETH for it, they were not just buying the digital file that could be acquired effortlessly for free, but the chain of proving materials that assures the file's legitimacy and rarity under the culture of digital abundance.

Since NFT functions on singular authenticity created by its programming, it can become an excellent tool to regulate illegal uses and counterfeited products. It is not unusual to see trails for fraudulent masterpieces in the visual art world, including the Rothko painting suit that took place in recent years. It is extremely challenging even for professionals to examine the authenticity of an artwork, mainly resulting from the exquisite craftsmanship of the copier or the artwork being private or lost track of. NFT seems to combat such difficulties since authenticity and “creatorship” are embedded inside the work’s codes. It is impossible to copy an NFT art piece and sell it as the real one as the original token is irreplaceable or dividable. In fact, NFT technology allows anyone on the internet to have access to the throughout archival information associated with each NFT work and makes everyone a judge or supervisor for future fakes. For example, Nyan Cat’s NFT profile page lists out its extensive bidding and transferring record, the ID of the users involved, inventory and contact information, and even comments and other online engagements. For each NFT file, all those information is made transparent and available for every person.

NFT’s ability to integrate digitized information may completely change how we traditionally deal with ownership and inventory. Institutions and platforms no longer need to rely heavily on signatures, labels, or other writings to investigate an artwork’s history and status. All the required information can be found in the same place and shared with everyone. NFTs even improve our current ownership and copyright system because NFTs do not exclude or keep others away from seeing and enjoying the artwork. The current copyright “protects the creators from those who might access a copy and distribute this work as their own for-profit” (Havens and Lotz). However, many consider this as “a monopoly grant” that “can limit elements of

culture” which threatens free expression and accessibility (Gaines). The strict law sometimes neglects artists from freely experimenting and creating art in response to existing works. To the total opposite, NFT enables audiences the freedom to download, use, and add on to the existing acquired files since the original NFT document is able to stay unchanged. NFT is built on popularity and exposure like other digital content: the more an NFT work is seen and appreciated, the more its value increases (Tehrani).

However, NFT also raises concerns for many. Some people argue that imposing scarcity among the abundance culture created by digitization is merely another way of capitalization. The essence of NFT technology is to monetize everything we see on the internet, squeezing and converting endless resources into pennies. People may also pay more attention to the financial worth behind each subject instead of the content itself. Many critics fear the over-dominance of commercial values in NFT artworks on top of their artistic significance would further distort the intention of “art for art’s sake.” The implicit logic will no longer be that the artwork is extremely well-done so that it is scarce to acquire, but the other way around that an NFT piece is only limited to one edition so that it is valuable. In addition, the current instability associated with the crypto marketplace and currency also becomes the obstacle for further development of the field, leading to intimidated and cynical audiences. The Nyan Cat was initially sold for 300 ETH that equaled to around \$590,000, and now that 300 ETH is worth over \$1,230,000, doubling the value in less than ten months.

Regardless of criticisms on how exactly NFT works and functions in reality, it is indisputable that NFT is a significant new prototype for granting authenticity and ownership. As an internet native, NFT is “born of the internet for the internet” (Tehrani). In the context of

mass digitization, the best way to protect digital intellectual property is to use means and tools from the same medium. NFT functions on scarcity, but it assures ownership and authenticity like no other system ever had. NFT also does not change the nature of the internet, in which information wants to be free (Tehrani). Instead, NFT pieces thrive on free transmission and circulation while providing a new way to give creators direct incentives. Chris Torres would instantaneously receive monetary incentives when a buyer bids on his Nyan Cat, and he will keep getting them every time when the bids go higher.

In fact, NFT was first conceptualized as a proposed way to “help artists monetize their digital work as it proliferates across the internet” without using the traditional credit system (Mattei). In our current context of digitization, content creators can only rely on receiving incentives from advertising companies and social platforms. However, sometimes those conversion mechanisms are somewhat vague and immeasurable. Many creative workers in different fields have produced viral content without earning corresponding incentives or even credits due to digital information’s fluid and unregulated nature. Numbers of relevant examples can be found in scenarios on Tik Tok, in which choreographers rarely get credited for the dance moves in viral dance videos. Video trend initiators and meme creators also never get nominations. In the music industry, it is not uncommon to come across controversies that involve unauthorized uses of audio recordings. And with fine art, Richard Prince’s trail with Instagram users exemplifies the lack of protection our current system provides for digital content and its creators. The NFT system speaks directly to the fundamental problem shared universally with people in the creative industries and offers an alternative way of protecting the rights of content creators. This mechanism will not only secure individual artists with protection and incentives

but also assure the continuity of future creations in different industries by valuing and respecting each digital work.

As expressed, NFT grants authenticity and scarcity to media content in today's backdrop of digital abundance. The sale of the meme Nyan Cat in the NFT file exemplifies NFT as the new way to secure, track, and monetize digital intellectual properties, which can potentially apply to all computerized creations. Clearly, there are obvious strengths and weaknesses to the current NFT system, along with external effects from the crypto economy and government policies. However, in my opinion, the system will mature as technology advances and people's dependency on digital platforms deepens. Human beings' tendency toward dematerialization and virtualization grows robust and faster over time. The diversity of mediums will inevitably diminish, and digitized homogeneity may take over in all forms.

Bibliography

Business Insider. "How Exactly Did the Nyan Cat Meme Sell for US\$590,000?" *South China Morning Post*, 28 Feb. 2021, www.scmp.com/magazines/style/tech-design/article/3123302/would-you-pay-us590000-meme-nyan-cat-just-sold-six.

Chayka, Kyle. "No NFT Is an Island: Artists Discover Ways to Use Nfts to Support Their Practice." *ARTnews*, 5 Mar. 2021, www.artnews.com/art-news/news/nft-art-practice-scarcity-1234585720/.

Gaines, Jane. *Contested Culture: The Image, The Voice, and the Law*. The University of North Carolina Press, 2000.

"How NFTs Are Building the Internet of the Future." Talk by Kayvon Tehranian, *TED*, Aug. 2021, www.ted.com/talks/kayvon_tehranian_how_nfts_are_building_the_internet_of_the_future?

Mattei, Shanti Escalante-De. "Can the Weaknesses of NFT Technology Be Fixed?" *ARTnews*, 30 July 2021, www.artnews.com/art-news/news/nfts-broken-technology-1234600107/.

"Nyan Cat." *Foundation*, foundation.app/@NyanCat/~219.

"Regulation of the Media Industries." *Understanding Media Industries*, by Timothy Havens and Amanda D. Lotz, Oxford University Press, 2017, pp. 83.

Torres, Chris, director. Nyan Cat [Original]. *YouTube*, 5 Apr. 2011, www.youtube.com/watch?v=QH2-TGUlWu4&t=61s.

Wilson, Anne. 2020. *The Evolving Marketplace: Essays on How Digitization and Abundance Influence Consumption*. Doctoral dissertation, Harvard University, Graduate School of Arts & Sciences.