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Posted on Thu, Mar. 07, 2002

'Photoshopping' grows into a subculture art form

By Stan Choe
 Knight Ridder Newspaper
 Is it art? Maybe.

Is it legal? Probably not.

Is it funny? Absolutely.

It's called photoshopping, and it's the digital generation's version of painting a mustache and glasses on the Mona Lisa.

With their computers, photoshoppers digitally manipulate pictures. They cut, crop and blend images into existing photographs to make jokes or social commentary. And the Web's newest, puckish subculture is burning across the world.

Photoshoppers' ranks are swelling as more people buy digital cameras and photo-editing software. Tens of thousands of people are logging onto a growing number of Web sites dedicated to Photoshops, especially over the past year.

They take pictures of Britney Spears and add healthy tufts of hair to her navel. They mock Starbucks Coffee's ubiquitous logo by blending it into the moon's face or an Egyptian Pyramid's side. They paste a bag of cocaine onto President Bush's podium at his State of the Union address. Then, they post their work online for all to see.

"The perfect photoshop is one where it's seamless, where it looks like an original," said Rich Partain, a 28-year-old in Huntsville, Ala., who has been photoshopping for 10 years.

"You can look at it and say it's art; it has that visceral punch. It grabs you in the nether regions and makes you howl."

Photoshopping's only purpose is to make viewer smile; no one makes money from it. Anybody can play with an image, anyone can enter the various contests sprouting across the Web, and anyone can visit the sites to appreciate the images. Popular sites include Fark.com, Worth1000.com, B3TA.com, SomethingAwful.com and PhotoshopContest.com.

The concept behind photoshopping is not new. People have been using Adobe Systems Inc.'s Photoshop software and Microsoft Corp.'s Paint to manipulate pictures for years. Graphic designers crop out extraneous bodies, soccer moms bleach out red eye and singles remove widow's peaks before posting pictures to online dating sites. (While Adobe is flattered its name has become synonymous with photo-editing, it prefers people not use "photoshop" as a generic term.)

But it's been only about a year that "photoshopping" has become a verb on the Web, and people have begun competing on Web sites to display photo-editing skills. About 20 percent of registered users use Photoshop exclusively for recreation, said Kevin Connor, Adobe's director of product management. Just a couple years ago, that percentage was in the single digits.

Photoshopping's evolution has been rapid. In short order, different movements have surfaced and celebrities have been acknowledged. At Worth1000, the photoshopper known as arsidubu prefers old black-and-white images and recasting fine art in new contexts. Most people at Fark recognize Turkish's work before seeing his name, with his ability to match coloring and shading when mixing different photos. He also enjoys using images of the elderly. Aarkieboy's work often is vile, featuring poor trailer dwellers or prostitutes.

Photoshoppers see their hobby as a nascent art form.

"You're taking something real and making something more out of it," said Avi Muchnick, a 23-year-old New Yorker who runs Worth1000.com, which fashions itself the artistic Photoshop site.

Photo editing is a derivative form, but it's much like hip hop, which has cemented itself in the past decade, proponents say. Like hip

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hop, photoshoppers take an original work and manipulate it until it becomes their own unique piece. And, like hip hop, they often tackles controversial or subversive topics, such as racism, America's cultural domination and politics. Especially popular targets are pop icons and the group People for the Ethical Treatment of Animals.

(Photoshopping, though, has yet to have a landmark Supreme Court case, a la 2 Live Crew's defense of its use of Roy Orbison's "Pretty Woman." Some say such a case is inevitable.)

Skill levels have increased as photoshoppers become more adept at using the software: More recent contest submissions have matching backgrounds and foregrounds, fewer jagged edges and more cohesive shading than they did just a year ago, Web site owners say. People no longer just cut and paste one person's head on another's body. They are putting a Ford Model T in the Daytona 500, toning a machine gun to match the sepia coloring of a Civil War photograph and pasting a pair of Oakley sunglasses on Jesus' image on the Shroud of Turin.

"People recognize and appreciate those at the height of Photoshopping," said Zack Parsons, 24, who helps run SomethingAwful.com, which regularly features Photoshops. "Comparing the skilled people with the newbies, it's like an incredibly talented lyricist versus someone who just has a rhyming dictionary."

Photoshopping has even evolved into different genres: Fark.com emphasizes speed and often features porn - and drug-related humor. Worth1000 has more literate, nuanced projects, such as Whistler's Mother playing a Sony Playstation or Thomas Edison with an iMac. Photoshoppers at SomethingAwful.com often sign their work, placing the group's grenade logo somewhere in the picture.

"Who cares what is art?" said Robert Manuel, who runs B3TA, a Web site devoted to photoshopping. "What is art' is pretty much redundant in the 21st century. We live in an entertainment culture. The only question is: Is it entertaining?"

Problem is, photoshoppers often get their kicks by manipulating trademarked and copyright-protected work. Some cling to the equivalent of an old wives' tales: If you alter an image by at least 20 percent, it's OK.

No so, say Christopher Bolen, co-chair of the intellectual property group for law firm Womble Carlyle Sandridge & Rice. If a copyrighted or trademarked image is recognizable in a photoshop, companies likely have a strong case for infringement, he said.

So, that photoshop of Britney Spears dumping Pepsi for Coke is not the safest thing to display on your Web site. The Associated Press has even contacted several photoshoppers who used AP photos.

"We want to tell them, when they are doing this, they are breaking the law, and they shouldn't do it," said George Galt, AP's director of business affairs and self-acknowledged copyright guru.

The AP is worried photo manipulations could dilute its reputation for providing reliable news, Galt said. The most frightening example, he said, was the photo that circulated shortly after Sept. 11. The picture showed a black-clad tourist, purportedly on the World Trade Center's observation deck on Sept. 11, with an airliner just behind him, heading toward the building. The photo was quickly debunked, but the image illustrated just how quickly fake photos can be disseminated.

Photoshoppers say they use the images to parody, which has some legal protection. Whether or not photoshops are parody is fuzzy, Bolen said. The AP contends that photoshops are not parody, but satire, which is not protected. Parody, under the law, pokes fun at a copyrighted image itself; photoshops poke fun at the content of the image, Galt said.

With photoshopping Web sites so new, Bolen saw his first photoshopping contest just recently, and only after a reporter guided him to the site. As he was discussing "fair use" and "immaterial portions" related to photoshopping, he stopped at a site featuring the Shroud of Turin. "I can't believe they put Oakleys on Jesus!" he said.



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