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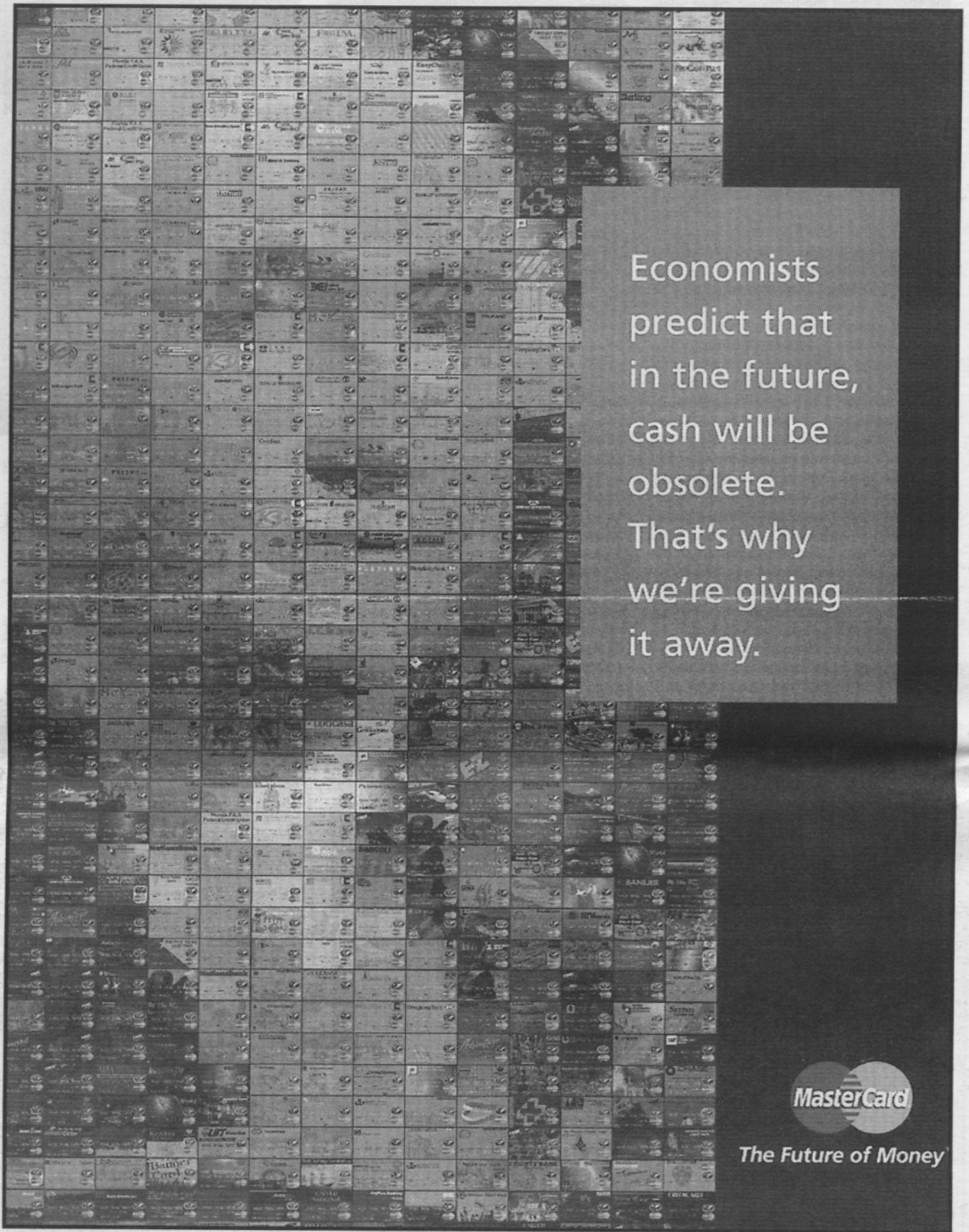
JOE MILUTIS

Everywhere, the pixel is disappearing. No longer is it obligatory to watch the pixel compose our images; images of the future will have left the matrix and the grid to become whole. The pixel *appears* to the extent that it fulfills a nostalgia for noise and the fragmented communiqués of an earlier digital age. Regardless of whether we see it, the pixel, in its general ubiquity, has achieved a depth of meaning that we can only begin to comprehend.

A drama of the pixel is emerging. Unlike a poetics of the pixel (which has indeed been taken up), the drama has the potential to fix meaning into a larger frame. The drama that structures the appearance and disappearance of these image fragments is one that partakes of larger systems of history and power. One of the main dramas of the pixel can neither be found in the urge towards High Definition Television (HDTV) nor in the delightful low-tech productions of the PXL 2000 toy camera, but in the recycling of an ancient game that has always provided a sort of abstract stand-in for the vicissitudes of real power in the world.

As I write, Kasparov versus Deep Blue is in the process of unfolding. This celebrated chess match is an event that in the most dramatic accounts is man's last stand against the machine, John Henry redux, a rage against obsolescence; in more sober accounts, it is an inevitability. Computer scientist and engineer David Stork, in his essay presented on IBM's Web site for the match, has said, "Nowadays, few of us feel deeply threatened by a computer beating a world chess champion anymore than we do at a motorcycle beating an Olympic sprinter." Of course, this is the banality of cyberspace—its ability to level distinctions by reducing all physical inputs to numerical values and all real space into the only initially fantastic network of interconnectivity, so that, it would seem, even "Big" blue loses itself in the deep blue, inaccessible by interface and invisible to all operators except a vaguely metaphysical one. However, it might be too simple to say that distinctions are merely dissolved into some ethereal data-domain made possible by the depth of computer power. It might be more correct to point to a manipulation of physicalities within real spaces, and the dramaturgy behind their visibility. For if the name "Deep Blue" implies some sort of loss of physicality—Big Blue as the corporate nickname for IBM referring, among other things, to what was once the standard color of the panels of IBM's large mainframe computers—this implication is a mistaken one. In a stunning reversal of the famous eighteenth-century chess automaton, "The Turk"—a set-up in which a dwarf, who actually controlled the chess machine, was hidden away—Deep Blue, a 7 foot, 1.5 ton machine *giant* is similarly kept out of sight in a very cold room adjacent to the match. The reversal is perfected when one takes into account the transformation from fake automaton to artificial intelligence, from hidden man to hidden machine. While the spatial and temporal location of Deep Blue is not actually my main concern here, it is important in the consideration of the location of its human challenger, and in regard to a certain myth of cyberspace that attaches to his image. For if John Henry found himself battling the machine in the impossible space under a great mountain at a time when technology transformed the landscape itself, where does Garry Kasparov find himself in this time of physicality lost, or, more accurately, hidden away?

He is, in fact, in a fairly familiar place—the chess board. Chess seems to bring to mind an obsolete locus now strangely reinvested with pertinence in order to dramatize new computer space. The chess board roughly stands in for a medieval geopolitical grid—one whose charm resides in the fact



MasterCard advertisement.

that it probably *never* pretended to represent any extant geopolitical field, even though its elements (King, Queen, Bishop, Knight, etc.) have ruled the land. These black and white squares that effectively resemble the field on which power will move for this game have, however, finally, if not apocalyptically, attained a reality, not just a verisimilitude; for what does the black and white grid resemble if not a field of pixels—those elements that compose our field of vision in computer space and that have increasingly composed the literal landscape upon which power flows and physicalities are manipulated and communicated?

Pixels are simply the little squares that fill up the screen; derived from the words "picture element," the pixel composes or decomposes the image. The more pixels there are, the more precise the image. Pixels are also memory elements, and the number of pixels possible depends on what in some contexts is called memory and in others bandwidth or absorption capability. Thus, the PXL 2000, the Fisher-Price toy "pixelvision" video camera, has a grainy,

pixelated image because it records on analog audio tape—a very limited information receptacle. With high-bandwidth digital media, however, the recording and transmitting apparatus is powerful enough to forget nothing except perhaps the pixel itself, banished from consciousness.

Whether the pixel becomes visible or not today would seem then to be solely determined by the sophistication of the technology, or, more to the point, the price of the technology (the pixelvision camera, however cheap, is in actuality a highly sophisticated miracle of engineering, image design, and savvy business practice accomplished by the creative team of James Wickstead Design Associates). However, the pixel has begun to appear publicly lately in high budget venues. *The Rosie O'Donnell Show* sports a stage curtain with a healthy smattering of pixels across it. A MasterCard ad composes the dollar-bill image of George Washington out of small MasterCard card picture elements. An ad for a talk radio station uses a pixelated image of President Bill Clinton, his singular, black and white image

Economists predict that in the future, cash will be obsolete. That's why we're giving it away.

MasterCard

The Future of Money

giving way to a multiscreen field of that same image which in turn degenerates into television snow. In this last instance, the multiplication and subsequent disintegration of the Clinton image is calculated to disconcert the television viewer, to highlight the pixelated noise behind image-driven national politics, and to win the viewer over to (local and right-leaning) talk radio. The logical outcome of the profusion of screens that characterizes the postmodern, this profusion of pixels—these little screens—potentially ratchets image anxiety. (It should be noted that popular representations of the pixel blur its analog and digital manifestations.) Does *The Rosie O'Donnell Show* utilize the pixel in an innocuous way? At one time, mainly in '70s broadcasting, television talk and variety shows utilized the pixelated backdrop in order to signify hi-tech, albeit analog, communication. *The Rosie O'Donnell Show*, in the spirit of its signature recycling of television history, perhaps utilizes this pixel for purely kitsch value in its anarchic festival of the object world. The stage floor is likewise composed of a grid, randomly lit with color,

the playing board for O'Donnell's game amongst the detritus in which, like the Queen, *she can move anywhere*. It is no surprise that a King was responsible for one of the last hold-outs of the "serious" use of the pixel, before the look of Windows 95 became the new look of broadcast power; that is, the old *mise-en-scène* of Larry King marshaled its pixels—a mosaic of mostly blue, uniform dots organized on a black, noiseless sea—into the form of a glowing geopolitical Mercator projection of the world. But the beauty of pixels is that their organization always implies its inverse; for example, the MasterCard composition of a dollar out of pixel-like elements tacitly threatens a fragmentation and collapse of the dollar, while overtly announcing its obsolescence as cash. Even in the '80s video art of Max Almy, Joan Jonas and Laurie Anderson, digital pixelation is used to imply breakdown, loss of control, amnesia and generally unhealthy and irrevocable immersion in some techno-corporate datasphere or another.

With advances in computer power and visualization technologies, the pixel threatens to disappear like the quaint checkered chess map. The death of chess, coincident with the victory of Deep Blue, might have less to do with who actually wins, and more to do with the fact that chess served its purpose in the early days of computer games as a contest easily represented with the visibly clunky old-time pixels. Now it is possible to render visible (and visceral) the moment of the King's death with minutely rendered three-dimensional representations of mercenaries storming the royal chambers and sending his Highness's body against the wall in a shower of blood with some super advanced kill-everything gun. Finally, after all these years in which the coup d'état, the highest form of political violence, has been rendered innocuous by the word "checkmate" (the "check" conjuring up the checkerboard pattern of chess and pixelation), we are finally able to return to its etymological Persian root *shah mat*—"the king is dead." Into the polite and somewhat aristocratic sensorium of chess, it would seem that the visceral thrill of contemporary computer games would somehow have to be injected in order for it to count as a compelling media event; and indeed, through publicity and hype, it does seem as though IBM has been successful in dramatizing the irrevocable stakes of a checkmate. *Time* magazine wrote, "Kasparov undertook a blitzkrieg aimed at Deep Blue's king, the sort of hell-bent gambit that has devastated every pretender to his throne. . . . [W]hat the program lacked was intuition—the ability to set traps, hatch plots, smell danger and generally enact the violent and paranoid predator from which the human race evolved and to which all great chess players return" (March 10, 1997). Make no mistake, this simple-looking, checkerboard game is one in which Kasparov wages hi-tech war. In Web ads for the match the dire implication of checkmate is facilitated through a drama of the pixel; for example, we see a pixelated and close-up image of Kasparov's eyes with the caption "You've never seen a computer game like this"—a fairly inaccurate but seductive teaser. In the blinking-neon fashion of some Web "billboards," this image loses its pixelated edges and Kasparov's eyes become alarmingly focused, if not riveted, on something intense. The caption then continues ". . . neither has Kasparov." What is Kasparov seeing? The fact is that what makes this game a game unlike any we have seen before is not because it is, *mirabile dictu*, a game of computer chess; what transforms this game into a unique event is what goes *unseen*—Deep Blue's "brute force search" (the juggernaut of combinations hurtled around in the depths of a hidden machine accessed by a thin, unassuming monitor) and the intellectuality of Kasparov.

Kasparov's pixelated image, then, is placed in the space of threat; what integrates his image, what synthesizes the pixels, what abolishes those little checkerboard squares, is precisely that which will test him beyond those squares. Computer power materializes his very body—we see the moving, because so utterly banal, video of the moment of his first loss—as if he is the protagonist of some more brainy version of *Doom*. Even so, we are reminded that Deep Blue, like the sky itself, is somehow beyond the physicality of the world accessible to vision. Whereas in the past blocky pixels were perceived to create larger aggregations of blocky pixels, yielding an approxi-



Cover of *Wired* magazine, November 1995. Portrait of Nicholas Negroponte created by Rob Silvers.

mation of an image, what we are seeing here is a myth constructed of a non-pixelated image. That is, it is as if the non-visual miraculously generates the visual out of thin air, and that the newly visual—no longer an approximation but a sort of reality—becomes visceral, implicating bodies and the destinies of masters. There is more than meets the eye to this strategy of simulating the coherent and embodied master to the public, since, contrary to popular views about the chaos of the body, it is *disembodiment* in chess that ushers in the threat of breakdown. The propensity for the chess master to wholly inhabit the deracinated dream time of this 64-square board has made this predominantly male game's history a catalog of madness, despondency and sexual dysfunction. A degeneration of the coherent image of Kasparov into pixels, given what the pixel has come to mean, might very well imply an erosion of sanity and a descent into some form of electronic madness or unwholesomeness (a state, needless to say, that is completely antithetical to the image of IBM; it would obviously be a liability to IBM if Kasparov were mentally destroyed by the match, even if he is the opponent of their technology and, as a Russian, a nostalgic signifier for some left-over cold war ideas of technological or cultural competition).

Today, the projected goal of technologies like HDTV is to remove the disconcerting pixel from consciousness, and to return to the qualities of analog, while keeping the advantages of digital. Founding director of the MIT Media Lab, Nicholas Negroponte is invested in "[t]he emergence of continuity from individual pixels." Of course digitization of images requires pixelation and there is no way to give up one in favor of the other: the process of digitization and subsequent communication of images requires that each pixel be assigned a numerical value in the form of a bit or bits. In this nineties version of paint-by-numbers, image quality depends on the power of its generator; the more power there is, the more pixels and the more bits assigned to each pixel there can be. The "continuity" that Negroponte desires is only possible by a super-fragmentation of the image into pixels with more memory; the fragmentation of the digital image, once highly visible (jaggies), is in this way becoming increasingly invisible. While certain video artists and computer aesthetes still enjoy the qualities of the visibly digital image, and embrace it as the foundation of digital space, Negroponte finds its qualities noisy and ugly, for example, "digital artifacts, like contours and blockiness." He uses the word "artifacts" as if the digital world were already a thing of the past. In

his 1995 book *Being Digital*, his desire to be, somehow, beyond digital might very well conceal a desire to return to the plentitude of an analog past—or maybe just a more convincing simulation of reality. This myth of non-artifactual, non-pixelated, high-resolution simulations of whole images

is a screen-induced myth, or more to the point, it is the myth of the screen. Just as technologies like CinemaScope and IMAX promised a total image without the fragmenting and manipulative recourse to *montage*, so new technologies of the screen promise the communication of a seemingly unmanufactured image without the distraction of its most basic elements.

But the promises of Deep Blue go far beyond the promises of Negroponte or of the screen. The alternate, non-entertainment plans for Deep Blue include Deep Blue as the great logical prognosticator/simulator of our time. That is, if in an experimental incarnation, Deep Blue can calculate not only the possible moves of a chess master, but also, of necessity, their possible permutations and consequences up to an inconceivable horizon, then the machine will be able to simulate the unforeseeable futures of everything from financial exchanges to the weather. Reality, it can be said, will no longer be crippled by its presentness, but it will push the realm of conceivable possibility to horizons unperceivable by most. In the spirit of chess, what does this foreseeable future do to our actions on the board—our politics, our schemes, our desires, our positions?

Deep Blue exposes the future of our place in the world as a cipher, while it is the pixel, in its appearance, that paradoxically might open up the possibility for a reinjection of the lived time and physical presence of the body into the conscious perception and visceral experience of the present. Is it madness to imagine bodies transmogrified into single pixels, pulsing wildly and longing for integration in a never attainable Screen? Like those pixels in the images of the PXL 2000, will they constantly gravitate towards more beautiful, heroic and spontaneous configurations? Whatever the outcome of the twilight of the chess master and the dawn of non-pixelated computer space, the destiny of nations will soon be generated at light speed, and the impossible image of the future will always, somehow, be kept in check. □

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