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Dancing with myself, oh oh oh

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Abstract

This writing is an attempt to draw together a number of diverse ideas about information, curation, friendship and identity, and to consider these in relation to experiences of dancing on and around screens. Much of the writing might be thought of as playfully experimental, and in it I reflect on what it is like to be a choreographer in this rapidly changing time, and how technology might be valued, abandoned, questioned and even used as a tool for listening. As a choreographic artist working amongst the eclecticism and noise of contemporary dance influences and practices, I propose that acts and experiences of solitude and silence might help us make sense of the complex choreography of our social and artistic lives.

Lists, death and filters

On the floors of Tokyo Or down in London town to go, go.

(Idol and James 1980)

Full

Standing. I am standing in the corner of a small gallery in North Melbourne. It's 2001. I am putting on my clothes. On a wall diagonally across from me, there is a short video playing. It is composed of both moving and still images and they are layers and layers of my undressing. It is an undressing from another time – not so long that I am unrecognizable, but long enough for it to be edited, reframed, given sound and screened: http://vimeo.com/23087595 (Ellis 2001).

I am not alone in this gallery. There are perhaps 25 other people – which makes the space quite full. They have paid to be here, and at this moment, they are watching both versions of me. They are glancing across and between my fleshed and mediated selves.

I can guess what you are thinking: 'You have only used first-person pronouns eleven times in the first few paragraphs ... what about you Simon?

Thanks for asking.

I am watching myself being watched. It is a slow kind of death.

With the record selection And the mirror's reflection I'm dancing with myself.

(Idol and James 1980)

I have started thinking of myself as a 'slashie' (Harrison 2011): as in artist slash choreographer slash dancer slash video-maker slash scholar slash teacher. This hybrid status affords me the luxury of dashing across ways of thinking and ways of reading and imagining the world. At the same time this slashie status produces a concern that has to do with feeling as if I am only ever just glancing at the world; that these glances might start to shimmer across the surfaces of so many experiences to such an extent that how I might understand and act in and through my self is jeopardized. With so much content out there – and if I am wearing so many hats – what kind of artistic work is produced by someone in an economy that has spawned such multiple personalities, and so many ways of noticing, whilst at the same time demanding evermore convoluted levels of specialization?

This is a difficult project, perhaps even 'the greatest challenge of our current, digital information age' (Bruff et al. 2011) in which the problem is no longer *accessing* information, but *assessing* it. This explosion of socially activated information – a 'dazzling rhythm of technological development' (Žižek 2001) – is fast, unwieldy and lonely. How might I (or perhaps we) resist this complexity? What if there is nothing to put all of this stuff into? How are we to decide? What if all our inboxes are full? Should I, as Bernie Michalik suggests, simply focus on my 'core people' (2011). This is a process that apparently involves grouping my contacts as core people, important people, people who make life interesting, and nice-to-have but not necessary people. How might we tread slowly?

Deliberately. Uncertainly. Haphazardly. Walking in a park. Barking like a dog. How might I share these various collectibles? What if we are not supposed to keep track? Slipping. Sliding. Brandishing a vacant look of what-the-fuck? Slowly watching the front-runners disappear into the distance. Their tails wagging easily, lightly and unknowingly, bounding, yapping, un-phased by the weight of things to come. What if I simply cannot decide what to keep? What if I do not want to be alone?

When there's no-one else in sight In the crowded lonely night Well I wait so long For my love vibration And I'm dancing with myself.

(Idol and James 1980)

All the knowledge is paralyzing.

(Rushkoff, in Davis 2010)

All of this knowledge, or at least access to all of this knowledge, has generated a vast range of opaque systems designed to filter data and make it feel plausible simply to imagine standing up amongst it all. These filters have assumed the language of museums and galleries in which words, ideas, works, software and sites are *curated*. Writing for *Wired* magazine, Eliot Van Buskirk worries that we are 'surrounded by too much music, too much software, too many websites, too many feeds, too many people, too many of their opinions' (2010), and suggests that curation is already fundamental to how we view the world. But is curation the same as choice made by someone (or something) on behalf of another? Unless the terms of those choices are made transparent, then what remains is a word euphemistically describing a filtering process (regardless of how personalized it is). Hence, we are left with a merchant in Texas calling his or her business a 'sneaker lifestyle shop' that 'curates its merchandise' (Williams 2009). To conflate curation with selecting or editing fails to address the exponential data dilemma, and also – and once again – leaves us reliant on commercial enterprise to verify and ensure our freedom to choose.

In his book *Programme or be Programmed: Ten Commands for a Digital Age* (2010), Douglas Rushkoff describes how a society that has 'looked at the internet as a path towards highly articulated connections and new methods of creating meaning is instead finding itself disconnected, denied deep thinking, and drained of enduring values' (Rushkoff 2010: 1). Rushkoff's solution is simple: in order to become 'conscious participants' in the development and distribution of content, then we must understand the biases of the technologies we are using and the ways in which we are programmed into them.



Full (2001), with Simon Ellis. Image: Elizabeth Boyce.

Standing. I'm standing in the darkness, and as the images on-screen are brought to a gentle end by the *frump* of a string-drawn homemade cardboard lens cap, I am called to action. I can still see the flicker of light between the lens and its cover – the scale of the mediated dancing muted – but my task now is to be now. My duality is compromised, but like an old friend I guess that when I next see him it will feel … Just. Like. Yesterday.

These choreographic actions in *Full* (2001) were I suspect the work of a young (I was probably emerging) artist acting with little fear or awareness of my link to the lure of screens, and the ways in which screens connect and multiply us.

Oh dancing with myself Oh dancing with myself Well there's nothing to lose And there's nothing to prove I'll be dancing with myself, oh oh oh.

(Idol and James 1980)

Here are two questions:

- How would you understand and describe your relationship to screens?
- Do you know where the off button is?

It makes me unsure of what really is ... It is about losing certainty ... And then the real film starts, the inner film.

(Carsten Höller, in Aitken and Höller 2006: 165)

Desire Lines

It is 2010 now, and this time I am standing still on a stage. It is in London and the space is contemporary-dance-conventional, with an audience in tiered seating at the front, and an open performance zone (no proscenium). On the stage, downstage right of where I am standing (or was standing), is a black screen built for rear projection. It is 2.5 by 1.9 metres (4:3 aspect ratio). I am also dancing on this screen – dancing with a friend and colleague Marika Rizzi; it is dancing that we ourselves had just performed a couple of minutes earlier. This small play within the play was videoed, captured to hard drive, and then projected at 20 per cent of its original speed. This is simple or complex



Desire Lines (2010), with Marika Rizzi, Tim Halliday and Simon Ellis. Image: Benedict Johnson.

technology depending on your world, but it fits Alan Kay's well-worn definition: 'Technology is anything that was invented after you were born'; and also, to a lesser extent, Danny Hillis': 'Technology is anything that doesn't work yet' (both cited in Kelly 2010).

... on the air we do not have any physical body. When you're on the telephone, or on the radio, or on TV, you don't have a physical body, you are just an image on the air. When you don't have a physical body you're a discarnate being. You have a very different relation to the world around you, and this I think has been one of the big effects of the electric age ... it has deprived people of their private identity.

(Marshall McLuhan 1977, in Clarke 2011)

My experience then, as it is now, is one of embodiment and disembodiment. It is acutely different from looking in a mirror, but also somehow similar – a mirror that does not demand my presence in front of it. The criticality of my eye and the vibrations between liking and not liking, the mix of novelty and familiarity, the materiality of the light being absorbed and let through by that off-black screen. This is perhaps a difficult everyday phenomenon. We see ourselves on-screens all of the time, but mostly this does not involve an audience that we are aware of as the actions are unfolding: http://vimeo.com/23088963 (Ellis 2010).

I see them – the audience – watching me. And him–me. And I am me watching me–him, and them. Who is this person I have become ... or am about to be? Who is that person on that screen to me? I think this might be how I know that conceptual problems are not just understood, but felt (Ryerson 2011). Which version of me is which in this case (as I reflect)? This projected me is acting, I am watching. But the distance feels vast. We talk the talk of how technology is shrinking distances, but my solitude is acute in this digital (projected) divide. I am experientially and perceptually different over there on that screen. Or rather, audiences understand that person there on-screen to be me, but recognize that it is a me from another time–space. A him-but-not-him. I suspect, though, that they-you enact judgments about my performance as if it were me, and are probably unconcerned with the chasm between my various performing selves.

That paragraph just set a record for use of first-person pronouns. Who said the author was dead?

Here is a 'you' in which my 'I' is reflected; here is where all distance is abolished.

(Stefan Zweig cited in Bakewell 2011: 7)

Zweig is reflecting on his encounters with Michel de Montaigne's *Essays*. Zweig's reaching through time and subsequent affects are made possible by words mediated through the technologies of print, but are not caused by them. The desire to 'transcend distance and separation ... longing for



Desire Lines (2010), with Marika Rizzi, Gail Hernandez Rosa and Simon Ellis. Image: Benedict Johnson.

immediate contact with people and audiences across any distance or divide' (Kwella 2011) is a cliché in media technology, but does the compression of Euclidean distance remain the acme of technological innovation? The danger lies in assuming that technological distance can be shrunk into some form or experience that approaches empathy or intimacy. And this is not necessarily implicated in screens, or data, or immediacy.

Whilst reflecting on these two encounters with my current and delayed (which words could be appropriate?) selves, I have started to imagine what my relationship is to them. You know, I quite liked him-me, especially slowed down. Slow motion will do wonders for anyone's dancing.

Whilst discussing her own, in this case, motion captured figure, Susan Kozel writes,

... it exists, it is not exactly the same as me, but is also not irrevocably different from me, and in a broader sense, we cannot pretend that the digitization of our bodies and social relations is going to evaporate or even diminish. Like it or not, we have digital twins.

(2007: 250)

Clearly, this is not me. It is of me. And yet you know it to be me in those images. There is no disguise. I appear to be a most ordinary man. I am not pretending to be someone else. Indeed, if anything as a choreographer I've repeatedly asked the same question: can mediation and screens somehow help audiences (and me) access a version of myself that is less trained, more normal, more intimate, more fragile or broken, more ... everyday? But perhaps this question simply makes no sense in the context of our theatres of illusion and representation?

Choreographer Michael Kliën's fourth proposition states, 'No more black spaces ... no more artificial voids' (2012). In other words, what use or value is a (dancing) human body stripped of its context and of its relationships? The social turn in choreographic practice is not simply marked by our willingness as choreographers to describe relational encounters between audiences and performers. There are also social or relational activities within the micro-worlds of performance spaces. These activities – between dancers, between dancers and seen and unseen contexts, between dancers and screens (also seen and unseen) between dancers and themselves – are delicately fabricated, constructed, mediated, delimited, choreographed, stripped of tradition, re-linked to other pasts, traditions and memories, abandoned and forgotten.

I was standing. Standing in darkness, watching my other myself – both sharing the darkness – and two things started to happen. First, and more immediately, I started to yearn for solitude. Second, and over more time – I began thinking of this projected version of me as a friend. What kind of friends might we be? Trustworthy? Reluctant? Passionate?

These two reasonably commonplace performance and choreographic situations – one in 2001, the other in 2010 – marked the beginning of this thinking. In this article I reflect on and imaginatively

construct the nature of my relationship with that ordinarily mediated dancing man. In doing so, I want to try and make some sense of the *social* with respect to friendship, solitude and perhaps even choreographic practice.

Self

In the eighteenth century, David Hume suggested that no one has ever seen a self (Dennett 2003):

For my part, when I enter most intimately into what I call myself, I always stumble on some particular perception or other, of heat or cold, light or shade, love or hatred, pain or pleasure. I never can catch myself at any time without a perception, and never can observe anything but the perception ...

(Hume 1896: Book I, Part 4, Section 6)

Hume argued that we 'never perceive causation directly' (Dennett 2003: 101), but rather succession from an apparent cause to an apparent effect. This 'necessary connection' (Dennett 2003: 101) is in part illusory and it is our minds that 'supply the sense of oomph, not the world' (Dennett 2003: 102). Mediated experiences like watching video or TV only work because of this necessary connection, and would fall over if we could (or were required to) see causation (Dennett 2003).

As my consciousness supports my (utterly imagined) faun-like leap across the dance floor towards this other dancing self, I become acutely aware of the illusion of unity – unity between the choices I had just constructed (either months or moments ago), and this projection. There is no oomph; it is more a quiet vulnerability located within what are essentially aesthetic decisions. It is a gentle kind of falling back on myself that is brought into being by a mediated other, whilst demanding – in a stage whisper – that I acknowledge my own foolishness to reflect on these materials and experiences.

As I write these words, even so as to be able to write them, I am pretended to a unity that, deep inside myself, I now know does not exist.

(Hamilton 1997: 134)

My various – and current – sensory worlds intersect with my remembered pasts to produce consciousness. Antonio Damasio describes this as self coming to mind (2010), and it makes possible autobiographical memory. This particularly human capability – to be aware of one's self whilst acknowledging the vastness and simplicity of the existential fine print – is celebrated in Montaigne's writing in which he places a 'consciousness astonished at itself at the core of human existence' (Merleau-Ponty 1964: 203).

I turn my gaze inward. I fix it there and keep it busy. Everyone looks in front of him; as for me, I look inside of me; I have no business but with myself; I continually observe myself; I take stock of myself, I taste myself ... I roll about in myself.

(Montaigne, cited in Bakewell 2011: 224)

The inevitable comparison to Montaigne's solipsism – given his fascination with the minutiae of his own life, and prose of 'improvisatory immediacy' (Brunskill 2011) – is the blogosphere and other technologies at the heart of Internet's social turn (what used to be known as Web 2.0). Sarah Bakewell writes of 'thousands of individuals, fascinated by their own personalities and shouting for attention' who 'delve into their private experience' in a 'shared festival of the self' – a 'global performance' (2011: 1).

I suspect understand that I am not one of these people.

Perhaps this writing is simply an extension of this desire to participate in a shared economy of the self, labouring under the (false) impression that others – similarly fascinated with themselves – might have time to bother reading or watching the things I have posted and am posting.¹

One difference between Montaigne and bloggers, according to Anthony Gottlieb, is that Montaigne couches his direct opinions within implicit or explicit concerns for their veracity and certainty, where as bloggers are 'usually sure that they are right' (Gottlieb 2011). Ian Brunskill writes that Montaigne's writing is of self-discovery not self-display and he possesses 'none of the bloggers fear of silence or desperate need to connect and communicate' (2011). These marks of humility and autonomy in Montaigne are something I admire deeply.

Friendship

If you press me to tell why I loved him, I feel that this cannot be expressed, except by answering: Because it was he, because it was I.

(de Montaigne 1965: 139)

Aristotle describes three types of friendship: friendship because you do something together, for example work colleagues; friendship where you share a pleasure, for example shopping, sex, rugby; and friendships of excellence in which it 'is the love that wants to know and be known by somebody' (Warburton 2007) and that spills over into wanting to know about the world around us.

Although Aristotle's advice concerning friendship was to 'host not many but host not none' (Vernon 2005: 4), friendship can also be prolific, and it is remarkably open-ended, unlike 'institutions of belonging' (Vernon 2005: 4) like marriage or work. As such, friendship is characterized by ambiguity, and although this makes friendship resistant to definition, philosopher Mark Vernon suggests this is appropriate because 'mistaking relationships for what they are not – that is being blind to their

ambiguity – [is] arguably the greatest cause of disappointment and failure' (Vernon 2005: 5). Friendships are also marked by – and generated through – time. The phenomenon of instantaneous friendship 'limited in quantity only by the number of people you meet' (Vernon 2005: 94) ignores time, and tends to hone practices of dissimulation or concealment. The relationship is simply assumed to exist.

Their relationship consisted In discussing if it existed.

(Jamesian, by Gunn 1969)

The dilution of friendship into socially networked clickable commodities forgets that choosing a friend is 'not much different from declaring another an enemy' (Vernon 2005: 95). The declaration of friendship is wired to exclusion, and involves valuing difference over commonality. Alexander Nehamas argues that because moral friendship insists on difference or exclusion, it has itself been excluded from moral philosophy that 'depends on our commonalities' (Warburton 2008). Jacques Derrida describes the formation of a friendly community that in order to be 'present to itself' (2005: 21) must be founded on election and selection. In the quality of difference or distinctiveness – as valued by the act of friendship – I might be able to make space for this not-quite-human mediated dancing friend.

Yet recognizing difference is not the same as assigning a binary to a set of conditions or people. How are we to navigate a politics of difference that demands an understanding of identity and foreignness, whilst it is absorbed – post haste – by consumerism? I can feel those charming Googlebots reading my e-mails in order to display a set of advertisements that attend to the distinctiveness of my communications.

Friendship ought to force us to confront difference and change. Nehamas suggests that friends 'guide us into becoming one kind of person rather than another' (Warburton 2008). The pain of friendship occurs when I no longer like the person I've become as a result of the friendship, in which my friend has been 'responsible for creating' something that I wish to give up. In other words, 'it's not you, it's me, still means it's you' (Warburton 2008).

Friendship now oscillates between relative meaninglessness – as it is consumed by social networking technologies – and carrying the political burden of a relationship status involving 'affection, tenderness, fidelity, camaraderie and companionship' (Foucault 2000: 136) that compromise the distances earmarked for shrinkage by consumer capitalism.

What does this have to do with my standing there in the dark – in Melbourne, and in London?

If art is, as Brian Eno suggests, 'the place where you become what you'd like to be' (1996: 225), then perhaps these mediated choreographies – with such distinct contexts (stage of career, audience numbers, economies, ambition, complexity, narratives, etc.) – somehow reflect a confrontation with the various identities I experience or imagine as a choreographer: limited, open, closed, egotist, communicator, visionary, uncertain, confident, dogged ...

Strangely, the foreigner lives within us: he is the hidden face of our identity ... by recognizing him within ourselves, we are spared detesting him in himself.

(Kristeva 1991: 1)

Cities and being connected

If a man were to undertake a systematic enquiry to find out what is most destructive of friendship and most productive of enmity, he would find it in the regime of the polis. (Philodemus of Gadara cited in Vernon 2005: 101)

Early cities were limited in size by things like walking and hearing distance (Mumford 1973). In the Middle Ages, to be within hearing distance of the Bow Bells – the bells of the church of St. Maryle-Bow – defined the edge of the City of London (Mumford 1973). The development of a city goes hand in hand with its development as a 'centre of a network of communications' (Mumford 1973: 80). These practical limitations of connectedness were overcome by the invention of systems of mass communication in the nineteenth century. Lewis Mumford, writing in *The City in History* (1973), maintains that the 'permissive size of the city partly varies with the velocity and the effective range of communication' (1973: 80). Broadband technologies have stretched Mumford's rule, yet two other curious phenomena are relevant to my thinking.

1. Kleiber, cities and creativity

In the 1930s, Swiss animal husbandrist Max Kleiber was researching animal metabolism. By comparing the metabolic rates of different organisms, he noticed a relationship – known as negative quarterpower scaling – in which larger animals are increasingly energy efficient. Kleiber's (increasingly debated) Law also predicts that, 'the number of heartbeats per lifetime tends to be stable from species to species' (Johnson 2010: 9), it's just that larger animals take increasingly longer to use up their allotment.

In 1997, theoretical physicist Geoffrey West published a highly contentious article in Science, which extrapolated Kleiber's Law to the city (West and Brown 1997). West and his team measured things like the number of service stations, road surface area, length of plumbing, and found that – like biological organisms – as cities became larger, they require less energy per unit of mass.

I can't tell you how satisfying this was. Sometimes, I look out at nature and I think, Everything here is obeying my conjecture. It's a wonderfully narcissistic feeling.

(West, in Lehrer 2010)

However, some of West's data did not fit with Kleiber's work. Curiously, all of these data involved some aspect of human 'creativity and innovation' (Johnson 2010: 10), and although they followed a similar quarter-power law, instead of being negative they were positive.

In retrospect, I was quite stupid ... I didn't pay enough attention to the ways in which urban areas and organisms are completely different.

(West, in Lehrer 2010)

As cities increase in size they produce increasingly more creative materials, and cities are valuable in part because they 'facilitate human interactions ... and start collaborations' (Lehrer 2010). Writer and social critic Jane Jacobs wrote in *The Death and Life of Great American Cities* (1965) of the importance of dense city living in promoting casual exchanges between people. For Jacobs, cities generate numerous shifting networks that afford interactions that are otherwise lost or missed.

In his book *Where Good Ideas Come From*, Steven Johnson (2010) describes the 10/10 rule of technological development as facilitated by modern cities. The rule indicates that, roughly speaking, it takes ten years to build something, and ten years for it to find a mass audience. This rule was devastated by Chad Hurley, Steven Chen and Jawed Karim – who, in 2005, created and launched YouTube – which went from idea to mass adoption in less than two years (Johnson 2010). The social structure of the web turned 10/10 into 1/1.

2. Cities, personality and us

Lewis Mumford describes the 'magical attraction' (1973: 85) of the city throughout history and the important change when cities came under the stewardship of kings. He suggests that the city gave rise to 'personality itself' in the king (at least initially) – 'self-directed, self-governing, self-centred, claiming for the single magnified "I"' (Mumford 1973: 86) – and that what evolved was a gradual diminishment of the notion of 'us' as represented by the power of the tribe.

As we became individuals-in-cities, we accumulated others. The division between my neighbour and me implicated an intense splitting of private and public (interior and exterior) actions, materials and understandings. Today, social technologies encourage us to share our intimacy with as many others as possible. Our material selves, and whatever personality we might assume, have begun to accumulate friends-as-data, and how we express intimacy is inevitably linked to screens.

The commercialization of friendship reaches an extravagant absurdity in the performance of consumption generated by a phenomenon like v-hauling in which young men and (particularly) women share their new purchases to hundreds of thousands of followers on YouTube. Facebook's

head of international business development, Christian Hernandez, suggests coolly that social commerce involves 'discovery, sharing, bragging about what you've bought, and redemption at the storefront' (Rowan and Chesire 2011).

The beautiful part of my job is a lot of this is happening without my having to go and talk to people.

(Christian Hernandez quoted in Rowan and Chesire 2011: 89)

Solitude

Any practice must concern your whole stance towards the world, and it's a stance that is intensely, relentlessly critical.

(Vernon 2011)

The temptation to withdraw is overwhelming; to 'uncouple' and become indifferent to the 'mad dance of accelerated process' (Žižek 2001). Slavoj Žižek's various criticisms of western Buddhism – by which he vaguely means some concatenation of Eastern systems of thought – is that meditative practices enable us to 'fully participate in the frantic pace of the capitalist game while sustaining the perception that [we] are not really in it' (Žižek 2001). This is the impossibility of solitude, and even as we consume ourselves in a race against the desire of others to do exactly the same, it is hard not to imagine that the smallest touch of hands, or the touching of noses and sharing of breath – what the New Zealand Māori call a Hongi – might become a monumental act.

My concern is that in focusing my attention on electronically mediated means of experience, I begin to withdraw and not question the implicit assumptions of the (choreographic) choices I think I make, and the choices that are made on my behalf. I start to imagine (again) a call to action. Consumer capitalism's relentless social atomistic drive promises a feeling of connectedness, the compression of distance, the illusion of instantaneous actions. But rather, it is the propagation and performance of transactions that seems to wrestle with my dancing – or my dancing that is about to be – as I stand there, contemplating a farcical friendship between me and my projected alias, my twin, my neighbour, my other: http://vimeo.com/23089008.

The role of art is to serve no purpose – which is not to say that art lacks purpose ... the political in art lies in its refusal to be an instrument. Art speaks only for itself. However this does not make it mere fantasy. Art is deeply committed to the world: it is definitely of the world.

(Gardner 1990: 10)

I'm reminded of my responsibilities as a choreographic artist, responsibilities that I all too easily ignore: to engage; to stay close; to keep acting to burst the bubble; to be reminded of my ethical blind spots; to seek pleasure in solitude whilst understanding the role that otherness (or foreignness) might play in my responsibility to be accountable; to act, and not be acted upon; 'to live with the others, to live as others without ostracism but also without leveling' (Kristeva 1991: 2); to keep valuing that which cannot be valued in fiscal terms; to relate, and seek methods by which the qualities of those communications are not limited by (or beholden to) technology.

We have a limit, a very discouraging, humiliating limit: death. That's why we like all the things that we assume have no limits and, therefore, no end. It's a way of escaping thoughts about death. We like lists because we don't want to die.

(Umberto Eco, in Beyer and Gorris 2009)

I'd like to end with one final list: friendship, solitude, and action.

So let's sink another drink 'Cause it'll give me time to think If I had the chance I'd ask the world to dance And I'll be dancing with myself.

(Idol and James 1980)

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Note

1. http://simonkellis.wordpress.com