

Subject: <nettime> On search engines  
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## Excerpts from an interview with Mongrel by Matthew Fuller



Matthew Fuller: The *Natural Selection* project at <http://www.mongrelx.org> is an Internet search engine that works in exactly the same way as any other one of these vast pieces of software that find data on the web, but that adds its own twists. It is clear that search engines have acquired immense positional importance in the network, acting as a gateway (both in the sense of allowing and blocking access) to material on the web. As a technical and media context, it is one that is riven with the most inexplicable density of political and cultural machination. Can you tell us something about the project?

Harwood: Well, basically, it's the same as any other search engine. The user types in a series of characters that they wish to have searched for. The engine goes off and does this and then returns the results. If you're looking for sites on monocycles, that's what you get. If you're looking for sites on elephants, that's what you get. As soon as you start typing in words like 'nigger' or 'paki' or 'white' you start getting dropped into a network of content that we have produced in collaboration with a vast network of demented maniacs

strung out at the end of telephone wires all over the place. The idea is to pull the rug from underneath racist material on the net, and also to start eroding the perceived neutrality of information science type systems. If people can start to imagine that a good proportion of the Net is faked, then we might start getting somewhere.

And as a search engine from Europe it runs faster than most US based search engines. Enlightenment and a cheaper phone bill - you can't lose.

Mervin Jarman: *Natural Selection* offers an added value to critical work on the Internet which is unequivocal in that it allows practitioners to plug their work into arenas that would otherwise be inaccessible. This is particularly because of its constructural texture, and its ability to redefine and redirect search strings to specified locations, commonly termed aiding and abating - luring the unaware into a spate of awareness that they may not have voluntarily wanted to realise.

H: One of the hidden things about the project is that it's based on a harmless hack on one of the mainstream Internet's most popular sites. We corroborate our searches with other search engines. They don't necessarily like us doing this. So we are engaged in a running battle with the site managers of various engines who keep trying to lock us out, trying to stop us reverse engineering their workings and using it to our advantage. Presumably they think we're some kind of commercial competitors. If only...

MF: That's an example of a technical conflict going on in the work, which is obviously a very live one since it messes so heavily with control of proprietary culture masquerading as social resource.

Echoing this, like most of Mongrel's work, *Natural Selection* doesn't shrink away from difficulty. If people are going to check it out, they need to be looking for more than a punch line, or a nice neat 'anti-racist' or 'multicultural' solution. The nineties have seen a near complete homogenisation of language around race. A fait accompli that trivialises the deep texture of language, culture and racialisation. We seem to have entered an era of a miserabilised 'politics of semantics' represented by arguments over phrases such as Bill Clinton's "It depends on what the meaning of 'is' is", and London's Metropolitan Police Commissioner Paul Condon's nervous wordplay in trying to avoid the acknowledgement of the institutionalised racism of the police.

At the same time, *Natural Selection* very much delves into this politics of semantics as it is constructed through software conventions and the protocols built into the World Wide Web.