

# Digital Age Etymology

## Cupertinos

Also known as “auto-correct errors,” a Cupertino error occurs when your computer thinks it knows what you’re trying to say better than you do. The name comes from an early spell-checker program, which knew the word Cupertino — the California city where Apple has its headquarters — but not the word “cooperation.” All the cooperations in a document might thus be automatically “corrected” into Cupertino. Courtesy of smartphones, Cupertino today are a richer field than ever — a personal favorite being my last phone’s determination to transform “Facebook” into “ravenous.”

## Meme

Richard Dawkins coined the term “meme” in his 1976 book *The Selfish Gene* as a shortening of the Ancient Greek term *mimeme* (“an imitated thing”). He designed his new word to sound like “gene,” signifying a unit of cultural transmission. Little did he know that his term would become one of the most iconic of online phenomena, embodying the capacity of the Internet to itself act as a kind of gene-pool for thoughts and beliefs — and for infectious, endlessly ingenious slices of time-wasting.

## Spam

The most enduring gift of British comedy series *Monty Python’s Flying Circus* may prove to be a digital one: the term “spam.” The key episode, first broadcast in 1970, featured a sketch called “SPAM”: the brand name used since 1937 by the Hormel Foods Corp. as a contraction of the phrase spiced ham. Set in a cafe where almost every single item on the menu featured spam, the sketch culminated in a chorus of Viking warriors drowning everyone else’s voices out by chanting the word “spam.” A satirical indictment of British culinary monotony, it took on a second life during the early 1980s, when those who wished to derail early online discussions copied out the same words repeatedly in order to clog up a debate. Inspired by Python, the word spam proved a

popular way of doing this. “Spamming” came to describe any process of drowning out “real” content — and the rest is repetitive history.

## Meh

There’s a special place in my heart for the supremely useful three letters of “meh,” which express an almost infinitely flexible contemporary species of indifference. In its basic exclamatory form, it suggests something along the lines of “OK, whatever.” As an adjective, it takes on a more inef-fable flavor: “It was all very meh.” You can even use it as a noun: “I stand by my meh.” Apparently first recorded in a 1995 episode of *The Simpsons*, some theories trace meh back to the disdainful Yiddish term *mnyeh*. Its ascent towards canonical status, though, embodies a thoroughly digital breed of boredom.

## Geek

“Geek” arrived in English from low German, in which a *geck* denoted a crazy person; in traveling circuses, the geek show traditionally involved a performer biting off the heads of live chickens. By 1952, the sense of a freakishly adept technology enthusiast had appeared in science fiction maestro Robert Heinlein’s short story “The Year of the Jackpot” (“the poor geek!” being the phrase) — and by the 1980s it had become a common label for socially awkward children obsessed with new technological devices. As this generation of tech-savvy youngsters provided the first generation of Internet millionaires, and then billionaires, the unthinkable happened: Geeks became cool (not to mention chic) — and ready to inherit the earth. ■

— **Tom Chatfield**, “*The 10 Best Words the Internet Has Given English*” (April 17, 2013); [www.theguardian.com/books/2013/apr/17/tom-chatfield-top-10-internet-neologisms](http://www.theguardian.com/books/2013/apr/17/tom-chatfield-top-10-internet-neologisms). *Excerpt reprinted with permission.*