Grazing the Digital Commons:
artist-made softwares, politicised technologies and the creation of new generative realms

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CERTIFICATE OF AUTHORSHIP/ORIGINALITY

I certify that the work in this thesis has not previously been submitted for a degree, nor has it been submitted as part of the requirements for a degree except as fully acknowledged within the text.

I also certify that the thesis has been written by me. Any help that I have received in my research work and the preparation of the thesis itself has been acknowledged. In addition, I certify that all information sources and literature used are indicated in the thesis.

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Abstract

The growth of the free software movement from the mid-1980s to the present day has contributed vast amounts of creative labour and technical innovation to what has become known as the digital commons. In many instances it has been 'the greater good' rather than commercial gain which has driven this research and production. Artists have played a significant role in the research, development, creative application and socialisation of various technologies, yet their recent contributions to cultural software have not been widely documented and critically examined outside of the media arts field. This thesis focuses on the recent work of the leading art group Mongrel, and their development of a powerful software platform called *Netmonster*. By drawing on current theoretical ideas from sociology including the qualities of immaterial labour in advanced capitalism, and the social and power dynamics of network society, I have built a framework to consider the social role and potential of cultural software. My research begins by outlining early developments in the history of computing, emphasising social and political factors shaping the technologies, and the ideas and goals of their inventors. This is followed by a discussion of the creative power of the digital commons, the collaborative labour processes involved in the free software movement, examples of innovative social technologies which are being produced, and the kinds of opportunities which can be opened up through the adoption of these tools and processes. The research concludes with an in-depth study of the *Netmonster* software. *Netmonster* is a 'poetic structure for producing network visualisations'. I draw upon my own participant-observer experiences of using *Netmonster* as a research and art-making tool in 2005 to explain and illustrate its features. According to Mongrel, *Netmonster* was created for 'the online resourcing and collaborative construction of the 'networked image'. A responsive, immediate and sensuous space for projects based on networked collaboration — the future of generative social software'. My research concludes that the digital commons is a thriving site of creative and affective production which flows through and animates the networks of 'informational capitalism'. Although the digital commons is increasingly a site of contestation as attempts are made by various forces to restrict, commodify or enclose it, it continues to grow and diversify, adding new nodes of generative activity to itself, and in the process transforming the nature of network society itself.