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Gutter Tech /

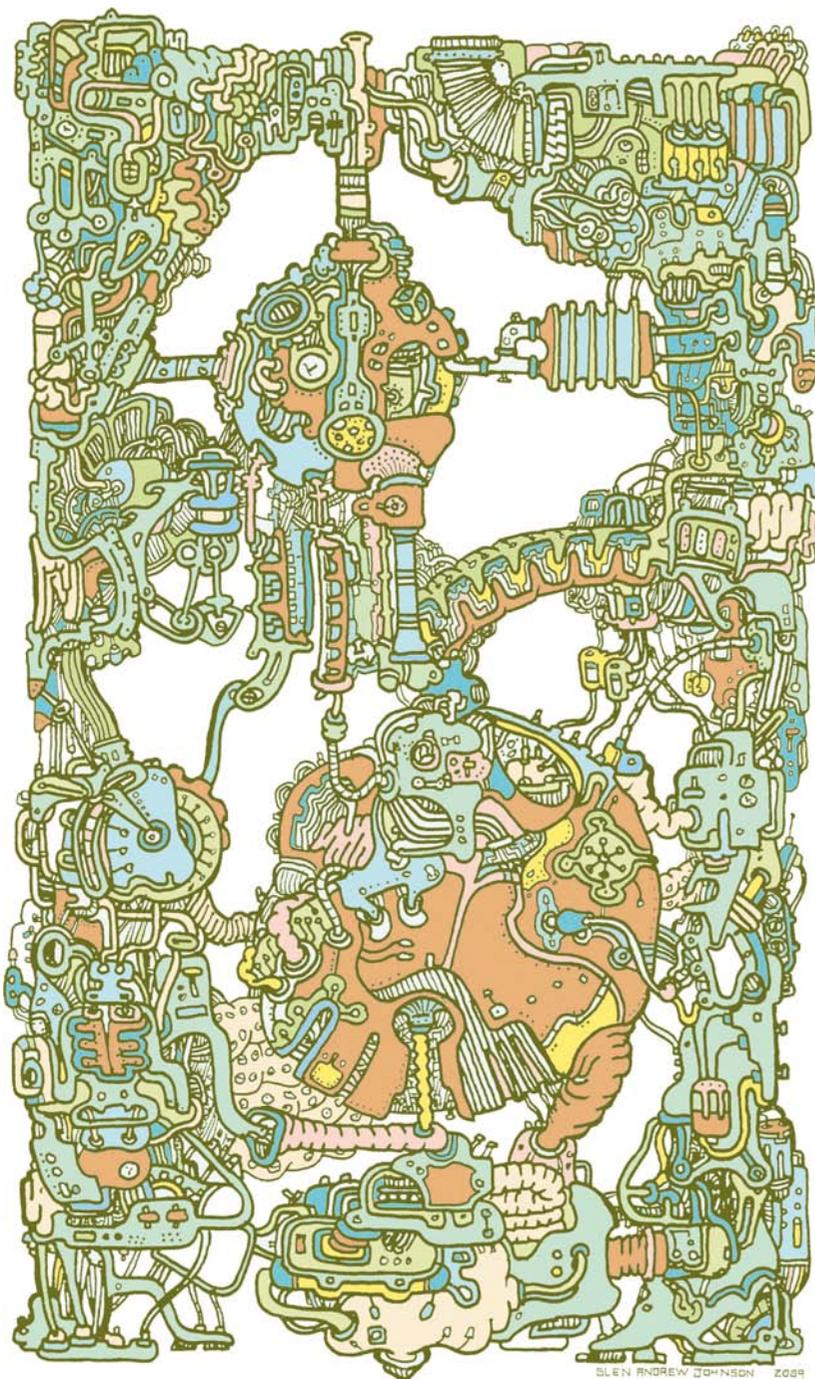
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# Squinting at Technology / To create memorable experiences, brands need to behave like 'gutter technologists' / By Nathan Martin /



To invent radical new experiences through technology, think more like an artist than a developer, more like a freight hopper than a commuter, and more like a parasite than a human.

On its own, technology is stale and unaffectioning. Deeply understanding the motivations of an audience and the adaptability of old and new technology allows us to transform seemingly boring machines into clever systems that engage participants.

Deeplocal is an innovation studio that helps companies rapidly develop and implement new ideas and technology. Artists, activists, punks, and hackers inform our company's culture. Building a culture that benefits our clients requires that as a CEO, I draw upon my previous lives as a singer in a punk hardcore band (search 'Creation is Crucifixion'), an artist recruiting subversives for deviant projects (search 'Carbon Defense League'), and a hacker running workshops about reverse engineering (search 'Nathan Hactivist'). In these lives, I learned to question everything and to create constantly.

Our most recent result of this approach is the Nike Chalkbot, which we developed for Wieden + Kennedy Portland, LIVESTRONG and Nike. The Chalkbot, which appeared on the cover of *Contagious 20*, is a hydraulic robot that sprayed messages of inspiration on the roads of this year's Tour de France in temporary, eco-friendly paint. Part monstrosity, part artistry, the Chalkbot relied on adaptation and 'gutter technology'. Built in seven weeks by a small artist-led team, the Chalkbot's brain was an off-the-shelf notebook computer and its spray guns are typically used to paint lines on roadways. The typographic tool that we used to build custom font sets

was nothing more than a grid of check boxes on a web page. Every component was reinterpreted. This collapsing of buzzword tech with old-school encoder wheels, trailer cranks, and toothbrushes (used to keep the spray nozzles clean), led to the Chalkbot's success and offers a glimpse into what is possible when we squint instead of look.

### Become a gutter technologist

'Gutter tech' means using the lowest possible technology to solve a problem. This simple idea is rarely executed well. Developers and even creatives devise concepts built strictly around new technology, ignoring the old. They forget how to problem solve and base solutions on past successes. We must use the viewpoint of an amateur to solve our problems. We must live in the gutter, scavenging for inspiration in the most hidden, absurd spaces. We must be willing to use all of the tools that are available to follow users' patterns, ignoring specific technologies.

Technology comes with a prescribed set of rules. Innovative amateurs naturally disregard these rules; experts almost always subconsciously abide by them. The downside of a greater understanding of technology is our adoption of its conventions and a restriction in our creativity. A gutter technologist makes tools when kits, manuals and prescribed rules do not exist. They may employ pirate radio before they employ Flash. They break free from the noise that surrounds technology and introduce radical new uses to traditional hardware.

One example of a gutter-tech campaign was for the mystery game Clue, created in 2008 by Jenny Luong and Jared Friedberg at Humber College, Toronto. Clue-branded soap dispensers were installed in public restrooms and filled with blood-red soap, temporarily discolouring peoples' hands and emphasising the notion that everyone is a suspect in the game. The campaign reacted to the behaviours of its audience rather than requiring new interaction.

### Squint at technology

To squint is to distort, to avoid the details and focus on the outline. Squinting opens your mind to the potential of what something can be rather than what it is. To squint is to forget your expertise and become a daydreaming amateur.

When we brainstorm a project, we forget technology. Instead, we consider our client's resources and what they are trying to communicate. Many firms rely on what they have built in the past, which results in an overload of boring commodity services that provide little value to clients and are completely ignored by customers. By forcing technology to come second, we are free to assess piece-by-piece. The importance of new technology lies in how people are affected by the tool, not in the tool itself. Squint. Think. Make.

### Old and new media

To evolve our culture, we have started an artist residency programme, called the Old and New Media Residency. We collaborated with Encyclopedia Destructica, a local arts group that specialises in bookbinding.

Artists work out of our studio one day each week and spend a second day with Encyclopedia Destructica getting feedback from a pool of local artists. Their final projects must use both old and new media, forcing them to consider how they affect and complement each other.

### Ringtones, bike bells and a megaphone

Deeplocal developed a platform called Gumband, which allows us to swiftly build applications that dissolve barriers between technologies, including SMS, VOIP, web, and hardware. Internally, the platform is used for rapid prototyping across media. Externally, we invited applicants to our residency programme to propose projects that use the Gumband platform but extend it into the real world through the integration of old media.

Artist T. Foley is a media literacy consultant and performance artist. As an artist in residence at Deeplocal, she created Locally Toned, a showroom of unique, locally-produced ringtones, some



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recorded by the artist and others phoned in by eager participants. Some have been downloaded 1,000 times, including a bike bell tone made by a bicycle safety advocate, and a Mr. Rogers Neighborhood ringtone, created by the wife of the late Mr. Rogers, a popular US children's TV show host. Other tones have been created for pinball games, street musicians, handmade toys and pets.

It is the experience, not the technology, that makes Locally Toned stand out. It is simple, fun and clever. Anyone can be or create a ringtone, and when T. Foley gets in your face on a bus or while roving the streets in a custom ringtone collection outfit, armed with a megaphone, people happily create their own tone. She thought of Gumband not as technology, but as a facilitator of her idea. We must challenge ourselves to do this each day.

For brands, thinking like a gutter technologist means developing engaging, moving and personal experiences that are not guided by technology but rather by the movement of people. Look to artists for insight and low-tech, cost-efficient opportunities. Do not be afraid to engage your audience directly. Personal and physical contact between a brand and its audience (even when mediated through technology) can help to penetrate the wall that users have constructed to defend themselves from traditional marketing. Do not spend extensive time on involved campaigns; think fast and prototype. Try, fail, and try again; think in the gutter. Your audience does not care about technology, they care about experiences. The brand that brings them a memorable experience is the brand they care about. 🎨

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Illustration / Glen Andrew Johnson