Episode Book

EPISODE #5699

From Dawkins to "Karen": How Memes Really Spread

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SYNOPSIS

In 1976, Richard Dawkins needed a word for a unit of cultural transmission — and accidentally named the internet's native language. This episode traces the full arc: from the Greek "mimeme" to Mike Godwin's 1993 coining of "internet meme," through Lolcats and image macros, all the way to the moment a Tumblr user captioned a stranger in Nintendo's Switch trailer and invented "Karen." Along the way, we dig into the scholarly fight over whether memes spread like viruses or like deliberate authorship — and why that academic argument carries real political weight. We also look at the SIR epidemiological model applied to meme spread, the strange case of the word "meme" becoming a meme itself, and why text, not GIFs, was the internet's first meme format.

TRANSCRIPT



Corn

A mother on a rooftop party, holding a Nintendo Switch, being told by a stranger's caption that she has ruined the evening. That's where we're starting today.



Herman

That is a very specific doorway into the entire history of the internet, and I love it.



Corn

It's Daniel's. He wrote in with a whole thing about memes, so let me put it across properly.



Corn

His observation is that one facet of internet culture that has shaped societies is the use of memes to create visual anchor points. Things that lodge in the eye and sometimes spawn new vocabulary entirely.



Corn

And the part he finds strange. Technology has moved so far past the point where a GIF was the best available way to make a point. And yet they retain this natural appeal, this cache. He says he's noticed the word drifting too. Outside the strict original sense, people now use meme to mean any short, shareable visual that becomes iconic.



Corn

Then he gets specific. He wants to use the pejorative Karen. The term for a difficult white woman, as he puts it. He wants to look at how it gained a lot of its initial use by being spread as memes.



Corn

And there are three questions underneath. How did this phenomenon emerge, how has it shifted over time, and how can its fingerprints be seen on so much of what we today call viral shareability, even when the thing going viral isn't a GIF.



Herman

He's asking about the grammar of the internet, essentially.



Corn

He's asking why the joke we all learned to make in 2011 still shapes how we argue in the year we're actually in.



Herman

So let's start at the beginning. With a biologist who had no idea what he was unleashing.



Herman

Richard Dawkins, The Selfish Gene, nineteen seventy-six. He needed a word for a unit of cultural transmission. A unit of imitation. He took the Greek mimeme, something imitated, and shortened it to something that rhymes with cream.



Corn

And deliberately sounds like gene.



Herman

Deliberately. That was the whole point. He wanted the cultural analogue sitting right next to the biological one. His own framing was that our cultural life is full of things that propagate virus-like from one mind to another. Tunes. Ideas. Catchphrases. Fashions. Ways of making pots or building arches.



Corn

Ways of making pots. That's the one that gets me. He's describing the transmission of pottery technique in the same breath as catchphrases.



Herman

And he's right to. A pot design and a joke travel through a population the same way in principle. Somebody copies. Somebody alters. Most versions die.



Corn

So when does it stop being biology and start being your group chat.



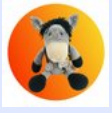
Herman

Nineteen ninety-three. Mike Godwin, the same Godwin of Godwin's Law, coins Internet meme in a piece for Wired. He's watching how these things move through message boards, Usenet, email. And by twenty thirteen Dawkins himself is calling modern internet memes a hijacking of the original idea.



Corn

Hijacking is a strong word from the man who invented the word.



Herman

It's precise, though. And it tells you the whole story. In Dawkins's model the meme mutates by random change and selection, the way a gene does. In actual internet culture, a person sits down with Photoshop and decides exactly how to alter it. That's not mutation. That's authorship.



Corn

So the thing he described as virus-like turned out to be deliberately engineered. Which is a real problem for the metaphor.



Herman

It's the central problem. And it's where the interesting scholarship lives. Limor Shifman at Hebrew University ran at this directly in her twenty thirteen book, Memes in Digital Culture.



Herman

A meme is a group of digital items sharing common characteristics of content, form, or stance. Created with awareness of each other. Circulated, imitated, and transformed by multiple users.



Corn

Group. Not item.



Herman

That's the load-bearing word. There's no such thing as a meme. There's a family of copies. Each one knows about the others, and each one is a deliberate response to the last.



Corn

Which is exactly why the Karen thing worked. Nobody made one meme. They made thousands of small variations on a person.



Herman

And that's the mechanism Shifman keeps pointing at. Memes spread by mimicry, where you recreate something in your own setting, or by remix, where you take the actual image and manipulate it. And then they diffuse through competition and selection. Except the selection pressure is now visible. The like count is the fitness function.



Corn

That's a grim way to describe a cat picture.



Herman

The cat picture is competing for reproductive fitness against forty thousand other cat pictures. And the ones whose captions fit the moment survive.



Corn

Henry Jenkins had a problem with all of this, didn't he.



Herman

He said the whole self-replicating framing sets his teeth on edge. Far too deterministic, in his words. It strips aside the role of agency.



Corn

Meaning it treats people as vessels for the meme rather than its authors.



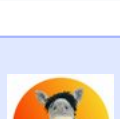
Herman

And Shifman largely agrees with him. Her line is that what drives cultural diffusion is not the mysterious power of memes but the webs of meanings and structures people build around them. She wants less of the mystical virus language and more attention to who is actually making this stuff and why.



Corn

Which matters enormously. Because if the meme has a mysterious power, then nothing is anyone's fault.



Herman

Yes. That's the political weight of a seemingly academic argument. If virality is a force of nature, nobody designed the thing that reached forty million people. If it's agency, somebody sat down and built it.



Corn

So the Jenkins side wins.



Herman

I think the Jenkins side is more honest about how it works. But Dawkins's framing isn't worthless. There is something involuntary about how a tune gets into your head and refuses to leave. People feel like they caught something.



Corn

The feeling is real. The explanation is just too tidy.



Herman

Now. To your earlier point about GIFs being the old way. This is where the record corrects the intuition.



Corn

Go on.



Herman

The GIF was never the only way, and it wasn't really the first. The earliest internet memes are text. Scott Fahlman puts up the smiley face emoticon, colon dash close parenthesis, in nineteen eighty-two, to mark jokes on a message board so nobody would misread sarcasm. That is about as unvisual as a meme gets.



Corn

And LOL.



Herman

LOL traces to a mid-eighties bulletin board in Alberta, Canada. Also pure text. The visual stuff arrives later. The Dancing Baby in ninety-six. Hampster Dance in ninety-nine. Both spreading through email chains, both animated, neither one a GIF in the modern sense of the word, and both surrounded by a huge amount of plain typed text going the same route.



Corn

So the premise that GIFs were once the best available means of making a point is...



Herman

It's a softening. The historical record points to text as the earliest carrier. Emoticons, ASCII art, typed abbreviations. Then email chain animations. GIFs are one format among many, not a clear predecessor.



Corn

Daniel will be fine. He flagged it himself as something he noticed rather than researched.



Herman

And the deeper point he's making survives untouched. These things keep working when the technology around them changes completely. That's the mystery. Not the format.



Corn

So give me the arc of formats.



Herman

Email and Flash animations in the late nineties. Then the forums, Four Chan, Something Awful, where Lolcats come out of and where the image macro gets invented. Image overlaid with large text, white Impact font with a black outline. That template is one of the most durable design decisions on the internet and nobody signed it.



Corn

Then YouTube in two thousand five.



Herman

Then Reddit and Twitter. Then Vine. Then TikTok. Then AI. And at each step the carrier changes and the thing being carried stays recognizably itself.



Corn

Which is a lot like Dawkins's original point, ironically. The copying is the constant.



Herman

Now, there's a mathematical shape to this that's interesting. You can model meme spread with the same equations you'd use for an epidemic.



Corn

As in, actual epidemiology.



Herman

Wang and Wood in Applied Mathematical Modelling, twenty eleven. The S-I-R model. Susceptible, infected, recovered. A meme hits a population, spikes hard, and then tapers as the susceptible pool drains and the infected lose interest. The recovered are the people who've seen it so many times that seeing it again does nothing.



Corn

So we're all immune to some memes. That's not a metaphor, that's just true.



Herman

You personally are immune to the ones you've seen two hundred times. The joke is still being told. It simply cannot land on you anymore.



Corn

And that's before we get to the fact that the word meme is itself a meme, which is the part that makes my head hurt.



Herman

Shifman says it outright. The term meme is a great meme. It's been enthusiastically picked up by internet users. The word has undergone its own memetic evolution. Technical biology concept, then a noun for a joke, then a verb. You got memed on. I'm meme-ing. And then the whole subculture vocabulary around it. Memelord. Dank. Deep-fried. Moldy.



Corn

Moldy is a good one. That's a word for a meme so far past its peak that using it is itself the joke.



Herman

Which is a sophisticated thing for a picture of a frog to have generated.



Corn

So to Daniel's first question. What is a meme, and how did the word get from a biology book to a group chat.



Herman

A meme is a family of digital objects that reference each other and get made on purpose to spread. The word got there because it was the perfect word for something that didn't exist yet when it was invented.



Corn

Called its own shot.



Herman

Called its own shot, then got hijacked, and is now the standard term for both the joke and the stock and the social type.



Corn

Right. Let's do Karen.



Herman

The earliest trace Wordorigins and Vox can find of Karen as a generic name for an obnoxious woman is Dane Cook. Two thousand five, the album Retaliation, a routine called The Friend That Nobody Likes. The line is that every group has a Karen and she is always a bag of douche.



Corn

That is a real documented sentence. I want everyone to sit with the fact that this is the seed.



Herman

And note that it wasn't a meme yet. It was a comedian naming a type. The name had no image attached.



Corn

So how does it get an image.



Herman

Twenty sixteen. October twenty-first. Nintendo drops the Switch trailer. There's a woman in it carrying a console to a rooftop party. A Tumblr user called Joematar screenshots her and captions it. Oh, you know what, I'll just quote the shape of it. Karen brought her stupid Nintendo thing to the party again. We're drinking. We're having conversations.



Corn

That's the first Karen meme proper.



Herman

That's the one. And everything about it is downstream of what we just described. It's not the photo. It's a person reacting to a photo and attaching a voice to it. The meme isn't the image. It's the caption that turns a stranger into a character.



Corn

And the character has a haircut, doesn't she.



Herman

She acquires one. The subreddit launches in December twenty seventeen. r/FuckYouKaren. It goes from around four thousand subscribers to over four hundred and thirty-five thousand, and eventually past one and a half million.



Corn

Four thousand to one and a half million is the whole story of the internet in one number shift.



Herman

And the visual identity crystallizes fast. The first pejorative entry in Urban Dictionary shows up in March twenty eighteen, and it's brutally specific. A blonde woman with an ombre cascade hairstyle who wants to speak to the manager.



Corn

Ombre cascade. That is a level of dermatological precision for a joke.



Herman

It's doing real work. A stereotype needs a costume or it can't be deployed. You need to be able to point at a person and have the room understand without a sentence of explanation.



Corn

So by twenty nineteen it's mainstream enough to get nominated for Word of the Year.



Herman

The American Dialect Society nominated it in twenty nineteen. It didn't win. Their definition was the stereotype of a complaining, self-important white woman, typically a member of Generation X.



Corn

And then twenty twenty happens and the word stops meaning what it meant.



Herman

It turns twice that year. First turn, early in the pandemic, it's the anti-mask, anti-vax, I-want-your-manager figure. The person who won't be told what to do in a grocery store.



Corn

Stage two.



Herman

Then May twenty-fifth. Two things happen the same day. In Central Park, a white woman named Amy Cooper calls nine-one-one on a Black birder named Chris Cooper, and she does it while he's asking her to put her dog on a leash. And George Floyd is killed the same day.



Corn

Same day.



Herman

And the word moves again. Aja Romano's piece in Vox from July twenty twenty describes Karen becoming a searing symbol of white supremacy. The hairstyle drops away. The grocery store drops away. Now it's the act of calling the police on someone because they exist near you.



Corn

That's a genuine mutation. The earlier version was about being rude to staff. The later version is about endangering a stranger's life.



Herman

And the linguist Kendra Calhoun made the connection cleanly to Vox. Her point was that the impulse telling someone you don't have the right to tell me to wear a mask is the same kind of impulse as you can't tell me to put my dog on a leash. It's not about the mask. It's about being told what to do by someone with less power than you.



Corn

The complaint is a lever. The actual subject doesn't matter.



Herman

And then it becomes legislation. A San Francisco lawmaker, Shamann Walton, proposes an ordinance against false, racially biased nine-one-one calls, and he names it the CAREN Act.



Corn

Spelled with an extra E, so that the acronym works.



Herman

Which is itself a joke sitting on top of a serious policy proposal. The name had to be funny or the ordinance doesn't travel.



Corn

The meme ended up writing a piece of municipal law.



Herman

And the most recent move is the ironic one. Research out of CU Boulder found Karen now being applied to angry women of any race, age, or background. Which is the pattern linguists track across a lot of words about women. Gossip. Hussy. The word starts as a precise critique and ends up as a general tool for telling a woman she's not allowed to be angry.



Corn

So it has gone from naming a specific kind of white entitlement to a label you can stick on any woman who raises her voice.



Herman

Including women of color, including people nowhere near the original archetype. The meme ate its own definition.



Corn

And the word most likely doesn't have one origin, anyway.



Herman

Wordorigins is explicit about this. This use of the name most likely does not have a single origin incident or inspiration. It's a confluence of trends. Dane Cook, Mean Girls, Goodfellas, the Nintendo meme, an SNL sketch. Vox calls the origin nebulous.



Corn

There's no first Karen. There's a cloud of Karens that condensed.



Herman

Same problem Know Your Meme has with the whole category. Their line is that it's extremely difficult to nail down the first true meme. Even the first internet meme is contested, and a lot of early internet is just lost. There's no Garden of Eden for this stuff. There's a swamp and some of it has already dried up.



Corn

So Daniel's second question. How did Karen spread and gain traction through memes.



Herman

It spread because it was a name that could be attached to a haircut, and the haircut could be attached to a behavior, and the behavior could be attached to a real news story. Each layer made the next one travel further.



Corn

And that's the fingerprints question, isn't it. That's the machinery.



Herman

And the same machinery runs on things that have nothing to do with jokes. That's the third question Daniel asked, and it's the one with the widest blast radius.



Corn

Give me the finance version.



Herman

Meme stocks. GameStop being the flagship. Meme coins. Dogecoin. The pattern is identical to Karen. A symbol gets loaded with meaning by a group, the group coordinates, and the coordination itself becomes the thing people are buying into.



Corn

The story is the product.



Herman

The same thing runs in politics. Pepe the Frog. The Dean scream in two thousand four. The Ted Cruz Zodiac Killer thing, which is a pure meme with no factual content whatsoever and which Cruz himself eventually started playing along with.



Corn

Because denying it is worse than owning it.



Herman

Owning it is the only move that keeps you in the joke. That's the same regulatory logic as the CAREN Act. The name has to be funny to spread, even when the underlying thing is serious.



Corn

And social movements.



Herman

The Ice Bucket Challenge in twenty fourteen is the cleanest case. It's a meme. Cold water, a bucket, a person, a video, a nomination of three more people. It funded an ALS research breakthrough. A joke format produced a real scientific result.



Corn

I keep coming back to that one, because it's the strongest argument against the idea that memes are just noise.



Herman

It's the argument that the format is neutral. It's a delivery mechanism. Whatever you load into it goes wherever humans go, for better and worse.



Corn

There's a market where you can literally trade them.



Herman

r/MemeEconomy, where users buy and sell shares in memes as a satire of Wall Street. Which sounds like a joke about finance until you realize the actual stock market now behaves the same way on certain tickers.



Corn

The satire got outrun by the thing it was satirizing.



Herman

Which happens a lot.



Corn

Then Daniel's real question. Why do they still work when the technology has moved so far past them.



Herman

I think there are three reasons.



Herman

One. They're cheap to make and easy to read. The image macro in particular is a format you can learn in ten seconds. The visual does the emotional work in a quarter second and the text does the argument. Your brain resolves the whole thing before you've finished blinking.



Corn

Speed.



Herman

Two. They're participatory. You can't just consume a meme. You have to be able to make one, or at least recognize the ones that reference each other. That's why Shifman's definition matters. It's a group activity.



Corn

Belonging.



Herman

Three. They carry judgment without carrying a full sentence. A meme is often the shortest available way to say I think this person is ridiculous and also I think you'll agree. That's an accusation that fits in a picture. That's why Karen happened to the word and not to a paragraph.



Corn

The format survives because it does something no other format does as efficiently. It packages a social verdict.



Herman

It's a compressed accusation.



Corn

Which brings us to now. And I have to say, the current picture sounds like a hangover.



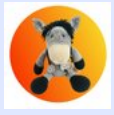
Herman

There's real fatigue in the system. TikTok users started complaining about a meme drought, and some of the blame landed on a cringe-culture community called SlimeTok, and a lot of it landed on the sheer volume of AI-generated brainrot content.



Corn

Brainrot. Which is a mouthful of a word for Gen Alpha slang. Skibidi. Rizz. Gyatt. Sigma. Fanum tax.



Herman

Brain rot entered circulation around twenty twenty-two to describe exactly that. High volume, low meaning, endless scroll.



Corn

And the response.



Herman

A loosely organized push called the Great Meme Reset. TikTok users frustrated with the AI content calling for a return to what they call classic memes. Nyan Cat. Big Chungus. The stuff from the twenty-teens.



Corn

Nostalgia for a decade people can still remember clearly. That's a strange place for a culture to be.



Herman

It is. But it's also predictable. If the S-I-R model is right, the recovered compartment fills up. The audience for any given format eventually becomes immune to it. And when the immune population is large enough, the format stops working and people reach for something older that they never got burned out on.



Corn

The meme drought isn't a failure of creativity. It's epidemiology catching up.



Herman

That's my read. And the AI content accelerates it, because AI can produce infinite variations of a joke, and infinite variations means no single version is memorable. A meme needs a scarce version to survive. If everything is available, nothing is.



Corn

The thing that spread by copying now has too many copies to be a copy of anything.



Herman

That's a real problem for the format. But I don't think it kills it.



Corn

Neither do I. Because the underlying dynamic isn't about the technology at all.



Herman

The technology was never the point. Text emoticons, Dancing Baby, Lolcats, Vine, deep-fried, brainrot. The carrier changed every time. The thing being carried is a human being trying to make another human being see something the same way. That's older than the internet.



Hilbert

Doesn't kill it. I had money in one of those.



Corn

Which one.



Hilbert

Doesn't matter which one. Four hundred and thirty dollars. I still know the number. That's the thing about those.



Herman

You were in the market for memes.



Hilbert

Everybody was in the market for a minute. A guy at work told me it was the safest thing he'd ever bought. I put in four hundred and thirty. It went up. I didn't sell.



Corn

And then.



Hilbert

Then it wasn't the safest thing he'd ever bought. I still hold it. Somewhere. I think. It's in an account I don't check.



Herman

You own a dead meme as a financial instrument.



Hilbert

On paper. It's not even on paper. There's no piece of paper. That's the part I can't get used to. I owned something and there was nothing to put in a drawer.



Corn

That's the whole decade in one sentence.



Hilbert

What's interesting is you two think the appeal is the joke. It isn't. It's the number going up. That's the appeal. The joke's just the thing that makes the number go up. If it didn't move, nobody would have made the picture.



Herman

The meme was the marketing.



Hilbert

The meme was the hook. Same as a good jingle. You don't remember the jingle because it was art. You remember it because somebody paid to put it in front of you until you couldn't get it out.



Corn

Which is Jenkins's whole point, isn't it. It's not a virus. Somebody bought the airtime.



Hilbert

Somebody always bought the airtime. The difference now is everybody can. Anyway, you're a hair hot on the second mic. I'll pull it down a touch.



Corn

There's a question here about whether the exhaustion is terminal.



Herman

I don't think it is. But I think the format is going through something it hasn't been through before. For the first time, the volume of new material is exceeding the human capacity to keep track of it. Every prior generation of memes had scarcity on its side. There were only so many people making them. Now there's no limit and no memory.



Corn

Which means the selection pressure changes.



Herman

Which means the selection pressure changes, and whatever comes out the other side isn't going to look like the twenty-teens. Nostalgia is a symptom. It's not the cure.



Corn

The misconception people hold about memes. I want to name the worst one.



Herman

Go ahead.



Corn

The idea that a meme is a joke. That it's a post you laugh at and move on from. The comfortable belief.



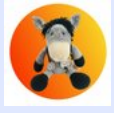
Herman

That one's wrong in a very specific way. A meme is a piece of infrastructure. It's a compression format for a social judgment. That's why it can carry a stock price, a political campaign, an ordinance in San Francisco, and a fundraising total for ALS research. A joke can't do those things. The joke is the coating.



Corn

The format is doing the work.



Herman

That's why Dawkins's word was right even though Dawkins's mechanism was wrong. He was describing a unit of culture that copies itself. He just didn't anticipate that the copying would be the most human thing anyone does all day.



Corn

One forward-looking thought, then, and I'll take it from what Hilbert said, because it's the right frame. He's right that the meme was never really the point. The number going up was the point. And if that's true, then the current drought isn't a failure of humor. It's a market that got flooded. The question worth sitting with is what replaces the format when the format stops being the cheapest way to move somebody.



Herman

Whatever it is, it'll look obvious in hindsight and absurd at the time. That's how all of this has gone.



Corn

That's the show. Our producer is Hilbert Flumingtop, who is currently adjusting a fader and has not yet told us whether he sold.



Hilbert

I haven't.



Corn

This has been My Weird Prompts.



Herman

If you got something out of this one, leave us a review. It helps other listeners find the show.



Corn

We'll be back soon.