

MEMETICS

WITH **MORRY KOLMAN**

THE POWER OF ELSEWHERE: A CULTURAL HISTORY OF THE “TO THE MOON” MEME

“Either bitcoins are going to catch on and their value is going to skyrocket to the moon, or they will wither on the vine.” With this offhand remark about inflation risk on September 27, 2010, BitcoinTalk.org user Bimmerhead (whose real name is Craig Dellandrea) became the first person to say that Bitcoin might go “to the moon.”

In the decade or so since then, this lunar metaphor turned rallying cry has become the memetic center of the crypto community. However you want to describe “to the moon”—meme, catchphrase, prediction—it’s impossible to think of Bitcoin’s history without coming across some iteration of this cosmic enthusiasm.

It takes a lot to go from white paper to community to globally relevant monetary system. In the early days, Bitcoin was always off the beaten path. People knew it as a niche internet fad or the way you bought drugs on the dark web. Memes were critical to the legitimization of the project in that they were a way to spread information and engage people in one-time bursts of content. Instead of needing to start off with an interest in crypto, people would be encouraged to join by just slowly picking up knowledge about it by virtue of being in meme communities.

Crypto’s practice of leveraging meme culture to spread awareness of itself can be dated back to 2010, when the first bounty for a meme to promote Bitcoin was offered on BitcoinTalk. A year later, this attitude was carried on by a thread titled “Bitcoin Memes,” where users discussed the necessity for building their community’s image and making the technology accessible through “friendly and funny” templates that would help bring new users into the fold.

While link rot and lack of indexing make any systematic history of “to the moon” difficult, the internet is littered with proof of its early adoption. In 2012, a user named Nanotube posted their song, “A Bitcoin Miner’s Lament,” on BitcoinTalk. The lyrics in the seventh stanza are about the stomach-dropping feeling of clicking to see the current USD–BTC price and sweating “out of every pore/it’s shot up to the moon, way up from before.” It only took off from there. By April 2013, NPR was referencing the meme in the title of a Planet Money podcast episode on bitcoin topping \$100.

The irony of doing meme research on an early blockchain community is that little record is left. Mt. Gox is barely accessible via the “Wayback Machine,” chat rooms are completely absent from the online record, and most platforms are loath to provide any kind of reasonably powerful search tool. One can find the debris of shitposters across early 2010s internet culture fueling the “to the moon” rocket with meme templates, copypastas and viral images, but the big picture has now become a matter of oral history.

Helping fill in the blanks of what one may call the early modern Bitcoin period is Brandon Wink. He is a longtime crypto enthusiast, editor-in-chief of the print publication Meme Insider, and writer for KnowYourMeme.com. Of all places, Wink said he first heard about Bitcoin on FunnyJunk.com.

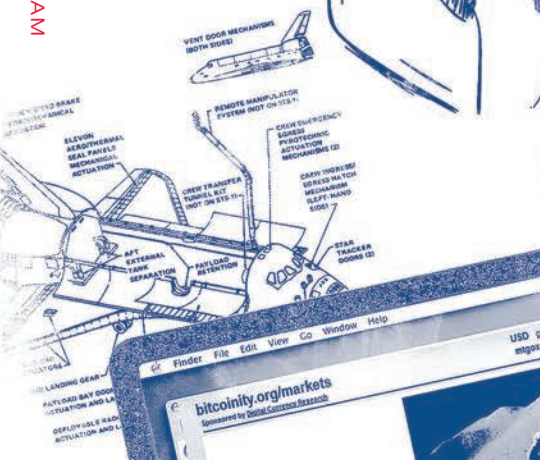
For the uninitiated, FunnyJunk is a firehose of internet content. Sporting a jet-black theme peppered with bright green and deep purple, FunnyJunk’s website feels like the phrase “terminally online” was meant to evoke the imagery of a Linux command line. Upon loading the homepage, you are greeted by no fewer than 220 different memes, organized by a sparse yet cluttered UI that signals loud and clear there are two types of people here; those who know their way around and outsiders.

Deluge nature aside, it’s surprising that FunnyJunk would be a generative environment for Bitcoin memes. Straddling the line between content aggregator and image board, the site is based around curating and commenting on material rather than producing it.





The Honeymooners





But, as Wink pointed out to me, the posts are only half the story: Content produces comments, and comments produce culture. Bitcoin benefited from the fact that the community there “would argue over anything, on any unrelated thing.”

It also helped that, unlike a lot of other forums or social media platforms at the time, you could respond to images with other images. Someone could post a random Bitcoin meme on an unrelated post about The Simpsons (sometimes even inadvertently — FunnyJunk has a command that lets a user insert a random image from somewhere else on the site) and boom.

“All of a sudden,” Wink remarked, “this is a Bitcoin thread.”

The cutting-edge, techy, controversial nature of Bitcoin made it perfect for these types of extremely plugged-in communities. Everybody visited them to interact with people who shared their interests, and nothing provoked a sparring match like an assertion about crypto’s future.

One of the more salient arguments in meme studies is that anonymous or decentralized communities tend to develop rich meme cultures because it is one of the only ways they are able to establish some form of collective identity (think of 4chan). In the absence of real-life figureheads or traceable profiles, these communities turn away from a more structured way of grouping themselves around individuals or specific groups and toward a horizontal, cacophonous culture of mutual recognition through participation and repetition. The only way for anything to become recognizable or an important theme is to have it repeated and remixed by the group over and over again, a shitposter’s democracy that transforms the condition of membership from an existing connection with a current member to a simple willingness to participate in the revelry.

Polling a crowd, you will get a few different answers for where it comes from. Some people credit the line to “The Honeymooners,” which used “you’re going to the moon” as a threat for a punch. Jules Verne is another popular source, with his 1865 spaceflight novel bearing the title “**From the Earth to the Moon.**” And of course, there is JFK’s iconic 1962 “**We choose to go to the moon**” speech. Wink, thinking specifically along the lines of an asset or value going to the moon, pointed me in the direction of Merriam-Webster’s history of the related term “moonshot,” which the dictionary identifies as first being used for the potential for a huge return (in an article on a horse race) in 1936.

Regardless of which way the causal arrow points, it’s this ease of entry that memes created that worked so perfectly for Bitcoin.

Of all the memes though, why does “to the moon” have such ubiquity? There are plenty of early Bitcoin memes that got discarded on the path up to the present. Almost no one remembers alpaca socks, and whatever advice animals were associated with Bitcoin are long gone. Most of the content in the crypto memes in threads from the early 2010s look just like that; memes from the early 2010s. What gives “to the moon” its sticking power?

It starts with understanding that a short catchy phrase is the ideal remixable unit. “To the moon” can be commented on a post, signified through an image or slapped on the bottom text of pretty much any template you want. Memes can be anywhere, but not every meme can take on every form. You cannot put “Distracted Boyfriend” into a text channel, just as the “Navy Seal cypypasta” is too long to turn into an image.

As little as 🚀🌙, however, is enough to have anyone familiar with crypto know exactly what you are referring to. It’s aspirational, it’s flexible, and it maps onto the price charts. Just HODL BTC and you’ll be rich enough to buy a ticket to the moon.

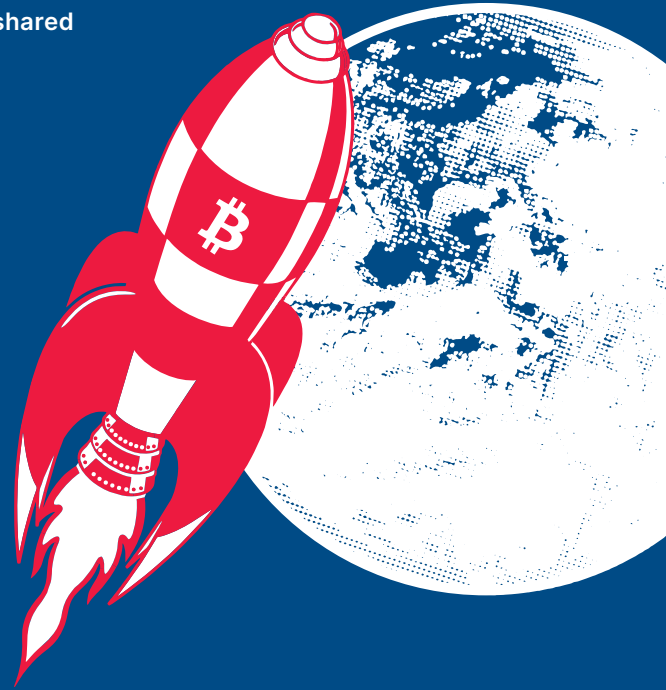
“**To the moon’s**” appearance as a meme is also the latest iteration in a long history of the phrase, a history that predates the publication of Satoshi Nakamoto’s white paper by decades.

Incidentally, 1936 also happens to be exactly the time when the space age began to kick off. Alexander Geppert, a professor of history and European studies at New York University, observed that, starting in the 1920s, a heterogenous group of scientists, artists, writers, occultists and other space enthusiasts started to band together in different areas of the world to take seriously the consideration of space travel. Apart from their ragtag makeup, these early space societies shared another important quality with the early Bitcoin community;

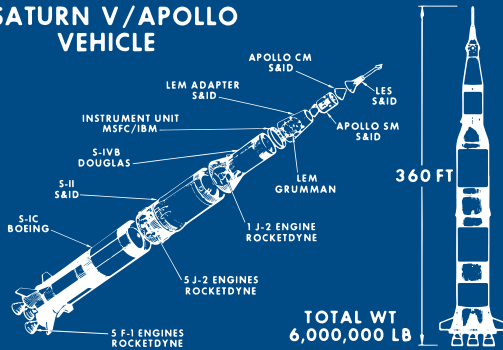
They were tasked with creating a new language.

The cultural history of space exploration in the first half of the 20th century is, in a certain sense, the transfiguration of the moon from an unreachable satellite to an achievable destination. While the idea of trying to actually go to the moon had been around since the early 1600s, the invention of the airplane and turn-of-the-century developments in rocketry laid the feeling among those invested that the technological means of actually getting there were within reach.

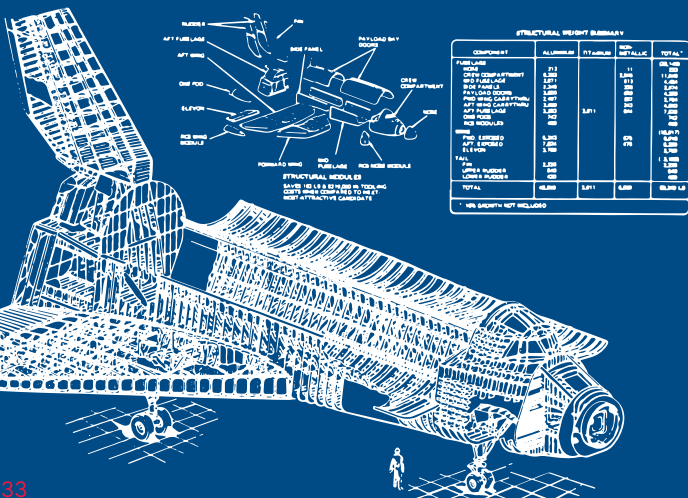
Scientific advancement, however, does not magically create popular understanding. There was a long road to be traveled before de Laval nozzles could become Saturn V rockets, and the only way to get there was through widespread support and funding. Up until that point, the moon was a dream and not a goal. They needed to make the desire to land on it legible.



SATURN V/APOLLO VEHICLE



To this end, there was a massive effort taken on by these societies to spread the idea of lunar possibility through whatever media they had available. In the press, journalists were invited to watch test launches, opinion articles were placed in newspapers, and each society had their own publications filled with illustrations, essays and explainers. They worked closely with artists, too, counseling directors on how best to portray rockets in the emerging genre of motion pictures.



While World War II put a pause on international collaboration, the formerly slow growth of these societies came roaring back in the late 1940s and early 1950s. No format was left unturned. The authors went on a sci-fi spree, the public intellectuals put on museum exhibitions, and the Belgian comic Tintin spent the better part of a half decade in outer space.

By constructing this new culture — one obsessed with going to the moon instead of looking at it — these societies stretched across the globe and changed the type of science that was possible. By the 1960s, Wernher von Braun (former member of the German space society, Verein für Raumschiffahrt) was using the book, “The Exploration of Space” by Arthur C. Clarke (former president of the British Interplanetary Society) to illustrate to John F. Kennedy (then-president of the United States) that they had the technology to get there if he had the funding to support them. Needless to say, they got it.

Lacking the language necessary to conceive of goals formerly incomprehensible, both Bitcoin and space communities produced rich cultural canons in order to bring their ideas to a broader public audience. Even so, we’re still not at the bottom yet. The dynamics of these two groups may be similar, and the linguistic limitations they’re running up against may share difficulties, but that still doesn’t answer the most basic question of sci-fi and shitposts; why the moon? What is so special about that oversized rock?

The distillation of it all, Geppert proposed, is that the moon invokes “the power of a political elsewhere.” It’s untouched, in a vacuum, the location of a society waiting to become.

The genesis block of Bitcoin contains the message, “The Times 03/Jan/2009 Chancellor on brink of second bailout for banks.” This headline from the U.K. newspaper *The Times* acts as both an approximate timestamp and a statement of purpose for what Bitcoin was to realize; a decentralized economy not tied to the interests of the state or subservient to the risks of fractional-reserve banking. In the few records we have of Satoshi’s online activity, there is an email of him replying to comments that he would not “find a solution to political problems in cryptography.” “Yes,” he responded, “but we can win a major battle in the arms race and gain a new territory of freedom for several years.”

Himself in the midst of an arms race, JFK prefaced his famous lines about the difficulty of getting to the moon with the importance of doing so. Tracing America’s history from its colonial origins to its role as a global superpower, he told the Texans gathered at Rice University in the fall of 1962 that “we set sail on this new sea because there is new knowledge to be gained, and new rights to be won.” These lines echo the sentiments expressed by Clarke a decade earlier in the book von Braun used to sell Kennedy on the idea in the first place — the significance of going to the moon laid “in the variety and diversity of cultures which it will make possible.”



BTC has hit \$60,000 twice. There are over 10,000 cryptocurrencies in circulation. In its skyrocketing ascent, Bitcoin has brought with it Clarke’s variety of new possibilities. There would be no Bitcoin, however, without the efforts of early community members to fuel its adoption by publicizing the project through every means available. When a redditor tags u/ToTheMoonGuy on a crypto thread, when Elon Musk discloses that SpaceX has a significant investment in bitcoin, and when this magazine finds its way to the lunar surface, they are all engaging in the same practices of cultural production that space societies took upon themselves many decades before. With every remix, template and cypypasta “to the moon” fulfills its own prophecy. Memes may not be rocket science, but they’re not too far removed.