



Howling at the moon

## Description



Google have launched 15 m wide helium balloons into the stratosphere to extend the Internet to remote areas. It's called [Project Loon](#). According to Google engineer working on the project Cliffe Biffle, [Balloon-powered Internet sounds positively mad](#) ([Youtube](#)).

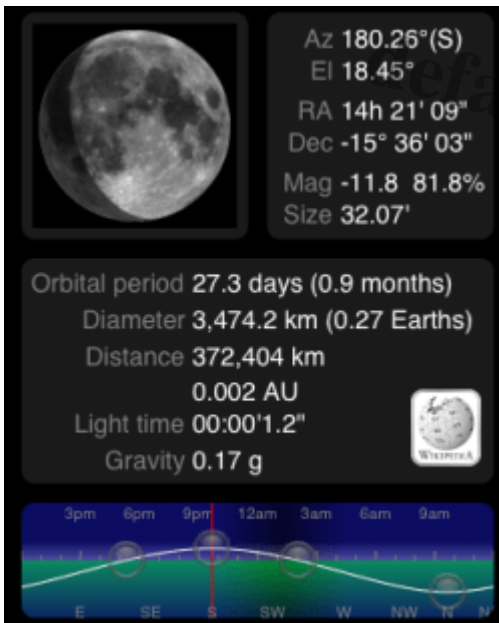
[Loon](#) is clever branding. The association with *lunatic* and the extra terrestrial is obvious. According to the OED *lunatic* originally meant *affected with the kind of insanity that was supposed to have recurring periods dependent on the changes of the moon*.

As I'm researching mood, I feel I have to look at the moon, or perhaps howl at it. Some studies provide tantalising evidence of a link between the cycles of the moon and the moods people are in, though other factors intervene, such as the weather.

According to one study, "In both summer and winter, people seemed to be less helpful when the moon was full than when the moon was less full" (p.1950), though the data was "ambiguous." It may not be the moon that affects people's moods so much as the luminance of the night sky, the tides, the weather, disturbed sleep, etc. Taking account of "confirmation bias," the evidence is probably available if you really want to believe that the moon affects moods.

## Lycanthropy

Certain myths strengthen the relationship between lunar cycles and human behaviour, and help us want to believe it. A fascinating thesis by Erin Flaherty summarises some compelling links between lunar cycles, menstruation, werewolves, and the Jekyll and Hyde story. Producers of werewolf horror movies generally depict the transformation of male to werewolf on the night of the full moon as a transformation to extreme masculinity: predation, aggression, an excess of hair, deep voice, etc. The transformed creature is the *lycanthrope*, human-wolf hybrid.



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But Flaherty marshalls support from several sources to indicate that the werewolf is really about the *feminine* taken to extremes: "As a woman's menstrual cycle has come to be defined by monthly blood loss, physical changes, vicious temperaments and insatiable appetites, so is the werewolf's transformation" (11). She argues provocatively that the werewolf transformation myth is about man becoming woman, the real "monster" in patriarchal society. That's one line of argument.

The Jekyll and Hyde story is also about transformation, and the doppelganger motif, as if each of us has within ourselves both the potential to (i) fit in as if normal and (ii) stand out as anti-social and monstrous. In Freudian terms human nature involves tussles between the sober and sane *ego* versus the more animalistic *id* part of our natures: a mood of sober reasonableness contrasted with occasional transformation to the converse mood of animalistic irrationality, and even rage. After all, people in a really bad mood are "bestly." They become "monsters."

In more abstract terms these narratives speak of the relationship between mood and transformation. The putative agency of the moon adds a third term. At the very least, the moon metaphor reminds us

that there is a cyclical aspect to people's moods.

## Moon modulators

The challenge for me is to think about what if anything these ideas have to contribute to how we understand digital media as mood modulators. Here are some candidates.

- Moods go in cycles, seasons, rhythms, patterns, subject of course to disruption. The digital devices we carry around with us participate in the recording, monitoring, and modulation of cycles. They can make such cycles more visible and obvious. These cycles include the delivery of mood-altering entertainment via tv and radio schedules. Digital devices make calendars, reminders, birthdays, monthly bills, and direct debits, more visible, and allow us to align with or resist such quotidian and annual organisation.
- The cycles of the moon represent a system of cycles that is at odds with the diurnal movement of the earth around the sun. I explored this idea in my book *The Tuning of Place*, introducing terms such as discrepancy, calibration, temperament, discord and tuning. The cycles of the moon also feed into festival cycles (eg Easter). Festivals and moods are related.
- Werewolves are not the only monsters in the human imaginary. If the functions of monsters are to displace, disrupt, hybridise, as a kind of matter out of place, then digital devices also fit the bill. See a discussion [here](#).
- In any case, the Internet is a medium from which the ardent believer can extract evidence for almost anything, including the proposition that the moon affects moods. It's a bit mad in this and other respects.



## References

- Cunningham, Michael R. 1979. Weather, mood and helping behavior: Quasi experiments with the sunshine Samaritan. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, (37) 11, 1947-1956.
- Flaherty, Erin M. 2008. *Howling (and Bleeding) at the Moon: Menstruation, Monstrosity and the Double in Ginger Snaps Werewolf Trilogy*. New York, NY: Honors College, Pace University [http://digitalcommons.pace.edu/honorscollege\\_theses/67](http://digitalcommons.pace.edu/honorscollege_theses/67)

## Notes

- Also see [Why cartoons have animals](#).
- It's been a lunar week. The moon was at its [perigee](#) last weekend.
- This week I attended an interesting workshop: [Festival of Methods for Studying Perceptions of Time](#). The moon was mentioned a few times.

- Iâ??ve not seen the *Ginger Snaps Werewolf Trilogy*, but in the Pixar-Disney animated feature *Brave* (2012) Meridaâ??s mother gets transformed into a huge bear. Itâ??s a contemporary made up story about *ursusthropy* rather than *lycanthropy* but helps sustains the myth of beastly transformations, coming of age, puberty, with a bit of sugar added.

### Category

1. Body

### Tags

1. cycle
2. mood
3. moon

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