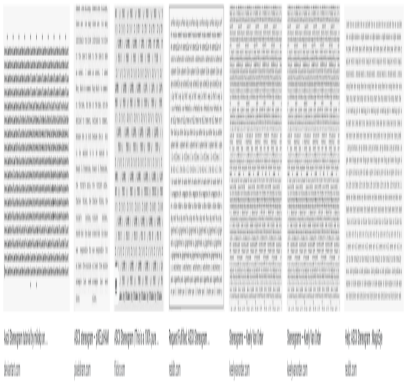


ASCII stereograms 101

Description

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In the 1990s, text email (without pictures) was the main channel for person-to-person communication. Mimicking early text printer graphics, arrays of evenly spaced characters could serve as simple pixels inside an email. Imaginative emailers followed this method to adorn their messages with emojis and ASCII pictures.

Amongst such text-based imagery you can find ASCII *stereograms*, arrangements of symbols on a page that when viewed in the right way reveal 3d pictures. (See previous post: What ever happened to autostereograms.) The Wikipedia entry for **ASCII stereograms** links to a short online article by computer scientist Jonathan Bowen that demonstrated the practice.

ASCII stereograms offer a low-tech means of hiding messages. Hereâ??s my attempt to deliver a secret message via a block of text repeated in two columns. What might be taken as careless typing serves to highlight certain words and parts of words by bringing them into relief, as if on a layer above the main text. The secret command here is from Flash Gordon to Earth!

```
I  rec^all the  craze in  I  recall  the  craze in
the  1990s  for  Magic    the  1990s  for  Magic
Eye  posters and  books.  Eye  posters and  books.
People  would  gaze  and  People  would  gaze  and
squint  at  these         squint  at  these
multicolou!red, seemingly multicoloured , seemingly
random, patterns  to      random, patterns  to
discern  3d images  of    discern  3d images  of
dolphins, elephants,      dolphins, elephants,
temples,  and  spaceships. temples,  and spaceships .
The  method of  display   The  method of  display
was  a variation  on      was  a variation  on
what  I experienced  as   what  I experienced  as
a  child,  as  I  gazed   a  child,  as  I  gazed
at my  bedroom  wallpaper at my  bedroom  wallpaper
that  at  times  seemed   that  at  times  seemed
to  be  on  a  different  to  be  on  a  different
 plan  to  the  walls.    plane  to  the  walls.
Our  chain  link  fence   Our  chain  link  fence
presented  a similar      presented  a  similar
 disruption to  depth     disruption  to  depth
perception.               perception.
```

In digital communications, encryption that is useful needs to be fast, foolproof and scalable. The practical use of ASCII stereograms is unclear. But to hide secret messages in plain sight brings cryptography into the realm of the human visual system, and hence the senses. It also brings the challenges of cryptography into alignment with optical illusions which are also more useful in shedding light on questions of perception and reality than they are practical. ð???

Reference

- Bowen, Jonathan. 1992. ASCII Stereograms. *Museophile*. Available online: https://web.archive.org/web/20080517013244/http://archive.museophile.org/3d/ascii-3d.html (accessed 15 July 2021).

Category

1. Media

Tags

1. cryptography
2. steganography

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