

# A Critical Discussion of Connections between Sources and Personal Practice

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# Project Walk Though

## LAYER I

A governmental letter from  
HM Department of Alternative Reality (HMAR)  
Prompting participants to seek out the 'Lost Universe'  
Puzzle is embedded in the letter content  
All characters blocked out by the black rectangles lead to a URL



## LAYER II

A nonsensical video collage made from 5 gov.uk browsing footages  
Audio is ...*Which was the Son of...* by Arvo Part and Tallis Scholars  
A choral narration of Jesus' Lineage to God  
Juxtaposing GOV.UK to the most important Western Canon  
The clue – a pair of geographical coordinates of a location  
is embedded in the video.



## LAYER III

A physical poster with the HMAR branding  
displayed at the designated location  
with 10 tear-off flyers on which prints an encrypted URL  
that leads to the bottom of this hunt.



## LAYER IV

Passage from *Aleph*, by Jorge Luis de Borges  
Laid out in a source code format  
Choice of text reflects the 'Lost Universe'  
one was asked to seek out at the start of the puzzle.

# The Most Potent Subject Matter

GOV.UK, an interface diligently designed to serve all bureaucratic purposes. The communication sterilises any traces of ambiguity, whilst confusions of any kind [hopefully] are scrubbed off any corner of the site. For me, this is the most mundane and facile matter accessible. When investigated in the right way, it can give birth to the most surreal, profound and saturated outcome.

# Dismantle the Authority

I decided to approach the brief with a playful sense of rebellion: the aim is to create the most un-GOV.UK-like contents with only materials directly related to GOV.UK, due to the tickle to challenge any authority. After multiple attempts to produce deliverables, I turned my attention to the cement and concrete that constructed GOV.UK's surface message – the webpage source codes. It carries a shared fascination of being 'the miles and miles of languages underneath the mere thin skin of graphics, sounds and notions in our screen world (Goldsmith, 2011, pp. 14-33).'

## Money and tax

Includes debt and Self Assessment

## Passports, travel and living abroad

Includes renewing passports and travel advice by country

## Visas and immigration

Visas, asylum and sponsorship

## Working, jobs and pensions

Includes holidays and finding a job

```
Elements Console Sources Network >> 1
<link rel="stylesheet" media="print" href="/assets/frontend/prin
a68bb36...css">
<link rel="canonical" href="https://www.gov.uk/">
<meta name="govuk:rendering-application" content="frontend">
</head>
▼ <body class="mainstream homepage js-enabled">
  ▶ <script>...</script>
  ▶ <div id="skiplink-container">...</div>
  ▼ <div id="global-cookie-message" class="gem-c-cookie-banner govuk-
data-module="cookie-banner" role="region" aria-label="cookie banne
nosnippet style="display: block;">
    ▼ <div class="gem-c-cookie-banner__wrapper govuk-width-container"
      ▼ <div class="govuk-grid-row">
        ▼ <div class="govuk-grid-column-two-thirds">
          ▼ <div class="gem-c-cookie-banner__message">
            <h2 class="govuk-heading-m">Tell us whether you accept
              ▶ <p class="govuk-body">...</p>
            </div>
            ▶ <div class="gem-c-cookie-banner__buttons">...</div>
          </div>
          ::after
        </div>
      </div>
    </div>
```

```
property="og:image" content="https://www.gov.uk/assets/collections/share-image-be49d960541005119207e133634bcdb7752d9b10de6864475c17d4fff."
property="og:description" content="Find information on coronavirus guidance, support, announcements"
property="og:title" content="Coronavirus: Find information on coronavirus guidance, support, announcements"
property="og:url" content="https://www.gov.uk/coronavirus"
property="og:site_name" content="GOV.UK"
property="og:type" content="website"
name="govuk:taxon-slugs" content="coronavirus"
name="govuk:taxon-slug" content="coronavirus"
name="govuk:taxon-ids" content="coronavirus"
name="govuk:taxon-id" content="coronavirus"
name="govuk:themes" content="coronavirus"
name="govuk:content-id" content="774cee22-d896-44c1-a611-e3"
name="govuk:schema-name" content="coronavirus_landing_page"
name="govuk:publishing-application" content="collections-publishing"
name="govuk:format" content="coronavirus_landing_page">
name="twitter:image" content="https://www.gov.uk/assets/collections/share-image-be49d960541005119207e133634bcdb7752d9b10de6864475c17d4fff."/>
```

Echoing the poetic practices and exploits of digital texts elaborated in *Revenge of the Text*, I decided to invite the usually hidden informations to the fore: with a methodology consisting of source code loading and .json transcription, I rendered GOV.UK contents to a cluster of seemingly nonsensical codes. Animated snippets of codes are woven into the puzzle of the second layer: a rich tapestry of moving images and sound. In search of clues, participants have to go through this immersive experience, and focus their senses on what is usually hidden from an interface.

The fourth layer, also the ‘awaiting epiphany’ at the bottom of this hunt is the climax passage of Borges’ *Aleph*, reflecting the ‘lost universe’ which participants were called to seek out in the first place, but laid out in source code format.

```
< On the back part - of the step,                toward the right,
    < I saw a small iridescent sphere of almost unbearable brilliance. \At first
I thought it was revolving; /< then I realised that this movement was an illusion created
by the dizzying world= it bounded/

<The Aleph/>*s diameter was probably little more than an inch,
    < but all space was there, actual and undiminished.
    / Each thing (a mirror's face, let us say) was infinite things, since I
distinctly saw it from every angle of the universe. =
    < I saw= the teeming sea;
    < I saw= daybreak and nightfall;
    < I saw= the multitudes of Britannia;
    < I saw= a silvery cobweb in the center of a black obelisk; I saw a
splintered labyrinth (it was Mayfair); I saw, close up, unending eyes watching them-
selves in me as in a mirror; I saw all the mirrors within the lofty borders and none of
them reflected me;
    < I saw= in a backyard of Regent Street the same tiles that thirty
years before I'd seen in the entrance of a house in [corrupted!];

    < I saw= bunches of grapes, snow, tobacco, lodes of metal, steam;
    < I saw= convex equatorial deserts and each one of their grains of
sand;

    < I saw the woman in Inverness whom I shall never forget; I saw her
tangled hair, her tall fi=gure, I saw the cancer in her breast; I saw a ring of baked
mud in a sidewalk, where before there had been a tree;
    < I saw= a summer house in Dorset and a copy of the first English transla-
tion of Pliny - Philemon Holland's - and all at the same time saw each letter on each
page (as a boy, I used to marvel that the letters in a closed book did not get scram-
bled and lost overnight);
    < I saw= a sunset in Arran that seemed to reflect the colour of a rose in
Regents Park;

    /< I saw= my empty bedroom; I saw in a closet in Euston a ter-
restrial globe between two mirrors that multiplied it endlessly;
I saw horses with flowing manes on a shore of the Forth Valley at dawn; I saw
the delicate bone structure of a hand; I saw the survivors of /Hong Kong
    sending out picture postcards; I saw in a showcase a pack of
frolicking * papier mache lions; I saw the slanting shadows of ferns on a
greenhouse floor under the shades of Fort Golkonda;

*>/ I saw tigers,
                                                    />pistons,

    >bison,
    >tides,
    >and armies;

    > I saw all the ants on the planet;

    >
        I saw falling incense turning carpets into ash;
    /I saw in the drawer of a writing table (and the handwriting made me tremble)
unbelievable, obscene, detailed letters, which {*Elizabeth } had written to John
Edward; I saw a monument= I worshipped in the Highgate cemetery; I saw the rotted dust
and bones that had once deliciously been [corrupted!];
>>
    I saw the circulation of my own dark blood; [

    ///
    I saw the coupling of /love and
the modification of death; I saw the Aleph ]from every point and
angle , and in the Aleph I saw the earth and in the earth
the Aleph and in the Aleph the earth; I saw my own face and
my own bowels; I saw your face; and I felt dizzy and wept, for
my eyes had seen that secret and conjectured object whose name is
common to all men but which no man has looked upon
    — the unimaginable universe.
```

This is a reversed process to the many examples discussed in *Revenge of the Text*: a text obviously aiming for a human audience but its appearance sympathising more with machines – or at least it tricks us humans into believing so.

# GOV.UK Uncorporate Identity

The setting of HMAR is another significant decision in this project. Similar to how GOV.UK's assertive visual rhetoric goes unquestioned when we interact with the site, the website's agenda is equally taken for granted. However, the nation state's corporate identity has wide scope for investigation and inquisition (Vishmidt et al., 2010, pp.5–49) – as covered in Uncorporate Identity.





# S.P.Q.R

I conserved all elements in the visual corporate identity of GOV.UK and used them as building blocks to create the identity of HMAR, to evoke a sense of surreality. To take it one stride further, I created a fictional background of the hunt: HMAR's secret plot to overthrow the current constitution, in order to restore a Roman style senatus populusque republic (I also incorporated Caesar cipher for encryption, taking this identity concept to a more literal level). This story gives the corporate identity of HMAR, borrowed from GOV.UK, a more wholesome volume – as all corporate identities are made to achieve.

# Conclusion

Finding connections between identified reading materials and my own practice has been an eye opening experience. It not only lights up more possibilities to experiment with, but also enriches my understanding of the subject matter and working concept. Alongside with the peers' reviews from the crit, I feel confident to carry this project to a next level.

# Bibliography

Goldsmith, K. (2011).  
*Uncreative writing :  
managing language in  
the digital age*. New York:  
Columbia University Press,  
pp.14–33.

Vishmidt, M., Grojs,  
B., Metahaven (Design  
Studio) and Van, J. (2010).  
*Uncorporate identity*. Baden:  
Lars Müller ; Maastricht,  
pp.5–49.

# Crit Notes

## WHAT'S WORKING?

- The engaging scavenger hunt structure that brings together multiple pieces of design
- The source code visual language
- The wholesome fictional narrative behind the setup
- The borrowing of GOV.UK visual identity
- The blocking out of letters in the 1st puzzle is a good expression of hidden information to be disclosed

## WHAT'S NOT WORKING?

- The reference to Cicero and *Lorem Ipsum* in the 3rd puzzle: its relevance to the concept and the overall journey is not clear
- The QR code on the 1st puzzle: too much of a giveaway suggesting instant access of information
- The confusion and inaccessibility of this hunt (whether this works or not is subjected to debate)
- Clues can be hidden deeper from the interface surface, i.e. the geographic coordinates hidden in the source code, not the video itself

## FUTURE DEVELOPMENT?

- Governmental letter in the 1st puzzle made to be more authentic: rigorous format, envelope, stamp etc.
- In the 2nd puzzle, I can potentially utilise the YouTube interface e.g. the description section
- Look for a technical solution which disables the progress bar and other video playback control features
- More exploration over political, constitutional and religious systems
- Use the QR codes as red-harrings or other obstacles in the hunt
- Enhance the experiential aspect
- Utilise both physical and digital spaces to give clues
- More thoughts on selecting the participants
- More engagement of GOV.UK website