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INCIDENTAL ANTI-CAPITALISM IN DESIGN
THE NOUN PROJECT

The Noun Project **IS** a business. One could say it **IS** focused on its own growth to some extent. However, it does offer one crucial feature that has widely democratized a crucial mode of basic communication: *free, high quality graphic design*.

“Despite a wealth of images available on the Internet, finding a good, copyright-free vector graphic is like looking for a needle in a haystack — especially if you’re talking about symbols for public services.” –Carren Jao, Fast Company

The Noun Project’s essential mission is this: “Creating, Sharing, and Celebrating the World’s Visual Language.” As a website, it catalogs symbols that are created and uploaded by graphic designers around the world. The project functions both as a resource for people in search of typographic symbols and a design history of the genre.

Code for America— a nonprofit devoted to improving how the government serves the American public— began by reaching out their go-to online resource for copyright-free symbols, The Noun Project via fan mail. Code for America sponsors an event called Iconathon, which are a series of five-hour design marathons dedicated much-needed symbols for public use. Upon hearing about the marathons, the founders of The Noun Project were so intrigued they jumped on board to assist in sponsoring. “The end result [of the workshops] are simple sketches that volunteer graphic designers then finesse into symbols to be uploaded to the Noun Project, free for anyone to use and with design attribution.” I get so excited about things like this, because not only would I *kill to participate* in one of them— an event like Iconathon teaches both designers and non designers the value of quick working and collaboration— all with the intent for producing a “free” public service.

The site was launched on Kickstarter in 2010 by Sofya Polyakov, Edward Boatman, and Scott Thomas, and is based in Los Angeles. At his former job, Boatman was frustrated with the lack of a central icon/graphic repository system— thus spurring the central thesis that would become The Noun Project. If a small startup, student, or regular joe is seeking a way to effectively communicate their message, ideas, or business to an audience, The Noun Project stands as a democratized resource for those entities to utilize the site’s content for their respective purposes. A crucial factor to note is that icons and graphics are only free when rights are attributed. There is an unspoken trust imparted upon users that they will not download the graphics and remove all denotation of original the designer. Personally— this makes me wonder how much of this *free* design is taken advantage of and turned around to be used for a profit.

The site other side of The Noun Project— one might say the capitalist-leaning part— gives users the option to buy a subscription to the site. With this service, they can utilize the content to the next degree. A subscription gives the user ability to use graphics free of designer attribution. I

find the site so fascinating, because it makes outside plagiarism **so. easy.** And there are many ways to maneuver around that pesky subscription. One could easily just screenshot the design, trace it, and flip it around as their own. Or you could download for free and remove attribution in seconds...

Faced with such pervasive potential for misuse of the service– how might The Noun Project evolve? Would this potentially look like fines for discovered instances of plagiarism? Or could the project utilize a sort of machine learning or intelligence that recognized when the site was being screenshot? Perhaps the files could be encoded, so that once downloaded, attribution could not be removed. The services could still remain free (with citations intact)– as the matter of democratized high quality design is still a very valuable commodity.

It does make me wonder about the motivations behind one “removing” the source of a design. Is it design-insecurity, or pressure to deliver high quality work without *doing* the high quality work? I also wonder what, if any impact, the Noun Project has had on small design consultancies and freelancers. If a startup or small business can just go to a website to get the various logos they desire, what use have they for any custom services? It is a question that is relevant to my career in the communication design field for both reasons. As a designer I have been directed toward The Noun Project to use as inspiration for co-op tasks. Yet, in school I am encouraged to create my own imagery from the ground up. I feel there is quite a bit that could be discussed regarding the ethics/implications regarding something like The Noun Project– specifically regarding what the future of the design field might look like in the future. In 2150, will AI utilize a database full of millions of graphics from a centralized location like The Noun Project? And in that case, will people pay the AI for it’s designs, and not pay TNP? I find it fascinating to wonder about...

<https://www.fastcompany.com/1664938/iconathon-lets-regular-joes-design-icons-for-city-problems>

<https://thenounproject.com/about/>

<https://www.codeforamerica.org/what>