



## Perverse Attraction: Idolatry, Pornography, and the Making of Infrastructure

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The making of novel infrastructure often involves some kind of faith. This article considers a pair of experiments in the context of blockchain infrastructure led by entrepreneur Ameen Soleimani: MolochDAO and SpankChain, a grant fund and a sex-worker payments network, respectively. These enact a strategy we describe as “perverse attraction,” or the inversion of dominant moral hierarchies as a means of cultivating faithful practice around a still-incomplete infrastructural project. Although the technology at play is new, the strategy for advancing it reiterates the development of past infrastructures, from print cultures to the early internet. These precursors and the present case suggest that the strategy of perverse attraction, while occurring under the guise of empowerment, risks reinforcing the marginalization of its human participants.

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## Introduction

In a reflection on discourses surrounding economic development, media scholar Lilly Irani (2019, 223) asks, “How do you popularize an infrastructure?”—and, more particularly, “What if infrastructure exists but people have not taken it up?” To these questions this article proposes one possible answer: a strategy we refer to as “perverse attraction.” Through this concept, we mean to highlight practices that employ the inversion of dominant moral hierarchies as a means of cultivating faithful practice around a still-incomplete infrastructural project.

This article presents perverse attraction through the examination of public texts related to the work of Ameen Soleimani, a contemporary entrepreneur influential in the subculture surrounding the Ethereum blockchain. Ethereum is a distributed-ledger protocol, first released in 2015, capable of processing arbitrary “smart contract” programs across a decentralized network. Supporters believe Ethereum is capable of far larger influence and importance than it has thus far achieved, to the point of restructuring economic and organizational life (Swartz 2017; Buterin 2022). A deep-seated commitment to the idea of decentralization has drawn a loyal base of advocates. However, their visions of its potential can be realized only through mass adoption. Since Ethereum is not a governmental public works program imposed from above, adoption is contingent on its ability to spread through voluntary use: early adopters, on multiple sides of markets, inviting in those around them until the boundaries of its periphery dissolve into ubiquity. Soleimani is among those who have adopted this goal as a way of life and a livelihood. He is best known as the founder of MolochDAO and SpankChain, an idolatry-themed grant fund and a sex-worker payments network, respectively.

This article draws on Soleimani’s career, along with its broader context, to inductively theorize perverse attraction for the analysis of mediating technologies and religious cultures. To be clear, it is not our intent to claim that perverse attraction is a necessary, or effective, strategy for building infrastructure. We restrict our ambition simply to identifying, describing, and considering its ethical implications. Further, when we speak of the “perverse,” we do not mean to make a claim about the ultimate moral status of any particular phenomena; rather, we refer to their perversity in relationship to dominant moral and religious norms—as an analytic concept rather than a normative one. This article details how perversion can operate as a technique for establishing novel, voluntary infrastructures.

While this analysis focuses on Soleimani’s career, we suspect perverse attraction has been used across diverse contexts, long before the advent of blockchains. Slavoj Žižek’s *The Puppet and the Dwarf* (2003) claims to identify, as its subtitle puts it, a “perverse core of Christianity”—particularly in the

thought of the religion's most prolific early church-planter, the apostle Paul. Paul celebrated the off-putting quality of his gospel, writing to his followers, "We proclaim Christ crucified, a stumbling block to Jews and foolishness to gentiles" (1 Corinthians 1:18 NRSV). If Žižek is right, Paul built the network infrastructure of early Christianity on the attractions of the perverse; the use of perverse attraction seems to appear not only among subversive startups but also in new religious movements that eventually establish dominant moral orders. Although Paul and Soleimani represent very different kinds of infrastructural aspirations, both find in perversity a strategy for constructing still-aspirational networks, attracting the early adopters who will form the basis of eventual mass adoption—whether it is the conversion of the Roman Empire or the rise of a new digital infrastructure for decentralized coordination. As Silvia Federici (2004) shows in her analysis of witch hunts and the rise of capitalism, performances of perversion can also repel people away from legacy infrastructures and draw them toward new ones.

This article builds on and contributes to past scholarship exploring the interrelations of religious phenomena and mediating technologies (Hoover 2006; Stolow 2005; Campbell 2012). Since our case study involves the intentional use of idolatry and pornography, its symbolic universe implicitly relies on dominant religious norms that categorize certain activities as perverse. In particular, we engage with research on religious entanglements with media infrastructures (Supp-Montgomerie 2021a; Ellis 2020). Infrastructure scholars have stressed the theme of visibility and invisibility (Parks 2007, 2015; Supp-Montgomerie 2021b), which is also a central theme for us—in this case, the visibility that can occur through the practice of pornography. We thus bridge infrastructure studies with literature exploring pornography as a pioneering practice for new technologies (Coopersmith 1998, 2000; Barss 2010; P. Johnson 1996). The stakes of blockchain infrastructure are particularly high given the degrees of control possible through protocols (Galloway 2006)—a type of infrastructure that sets the basic rules of communication across a network.

The article begins with an overview of the case study, introducing the two major projects of Soleimani's career. It then explores historical precedents and, through an analysis of the case, presents the concept of perverse attraction. The subsequent section considers the claims of empowerment through blockchain-based pornography in light of past experience and scholarship. By the end, it will have introduced a strategy for infrastructure development and called into question some of this strategy's basic claims.

### **From MolochDAO to SpankChain**

On Valentine's Day 2019, Ameen Soleimani announced the deployment of the smart contract representing MolochDAO on the Ethereum blockchain

(MolochDAO, n.d.-b). As the name suggests, the code was intended to be the basis of a DAO, or decentralized autonomous organization—an organization governed by rules described in software on a blockchain and carried out through virtual tokens rather than conventional processes of legal incorporation. MolochDAO proved a landmark moment in the development of the growing subculture surrounding blockchains, cryptocurrencies, and DAOs that this article refers to collectively as “crypto.”

The arrival of MolochDAO occurred in the depths of the “crypto winter,” a downturn following the speculative frenzy of early 2018. The first prominent DAO, called simply “The DAO,” had been decimated by a hacker soon after its launch in 2016, nearly taking Ethereum as a whole down with it (Reijers et al. 2018). MolochDAO would involve many of the same leading figures in the Ethereum community. It was a collectively governed grant fund, an attempt to lift the spirits of Ethereum true believers by channeling valuable digital tokens to projects deemed worthwhile (Soleimani et al. 2019). Soon, it was distributing hundreds of thousands of dollars in donated cryptocurrency each year (MolochDAO 2022).

The “Moloch” part of MolochDAO’s name was suggestive as well. Moloch is an ancient Canaanite god in the Hebrew Bible whose followers appear to practice child sacrifice. In this story, Moloch stands as a canonical example of the Jewish and eventually Christian concepts of idolatry (C. L. Johnson 2006). Soleimani explains that he took the name for the project from an essay by the blogger Scott Alexander. The essay, “Meditations on Moloch,” dwells on the portions of Allen Ginsberg’s mid-1950s poem “Howl” that invoke Moloch (Alexander 2014). This passage from “Howl,” for instance, became the background of MolochDAO’s Twitter account: “Moloch whose mind is pure machinery! Moloch whose blood is running money! Moloch whose fingers are ten armies! Moloch whose breast is a cannibal dynamo! Moloch whose ear is a smoking tomb!” (Ginsberg 1956).

The conventional reading of Ginsberg’s poem is as a denunciation of 1950s America—“ensconced in suburban comfort, conformity, and the official ideology of containment” (Gray 2010). Against the buttoned-down Cold War empire of IBM suits and “one nation under God,” Ginsberg presaged the 1960s rebellions that were only beginning to brew. Half a century after it was written, however, Alexander read “Howl” differently. Ginsberg’s Moloch, for Alexander (2014), represents a more technocratic sort of complaint: “insufficient coordination,” “a perverse failure to optimize.” Moloch is the condition in which “every single citizen hates the system, but for lack of a good coordination mechanism it endures” (Alexander 2014). No longer is “machinery” really the problem, because for Alexander, “technology has the potential to seriously improve coordination efforts” (Alexander 2014). With

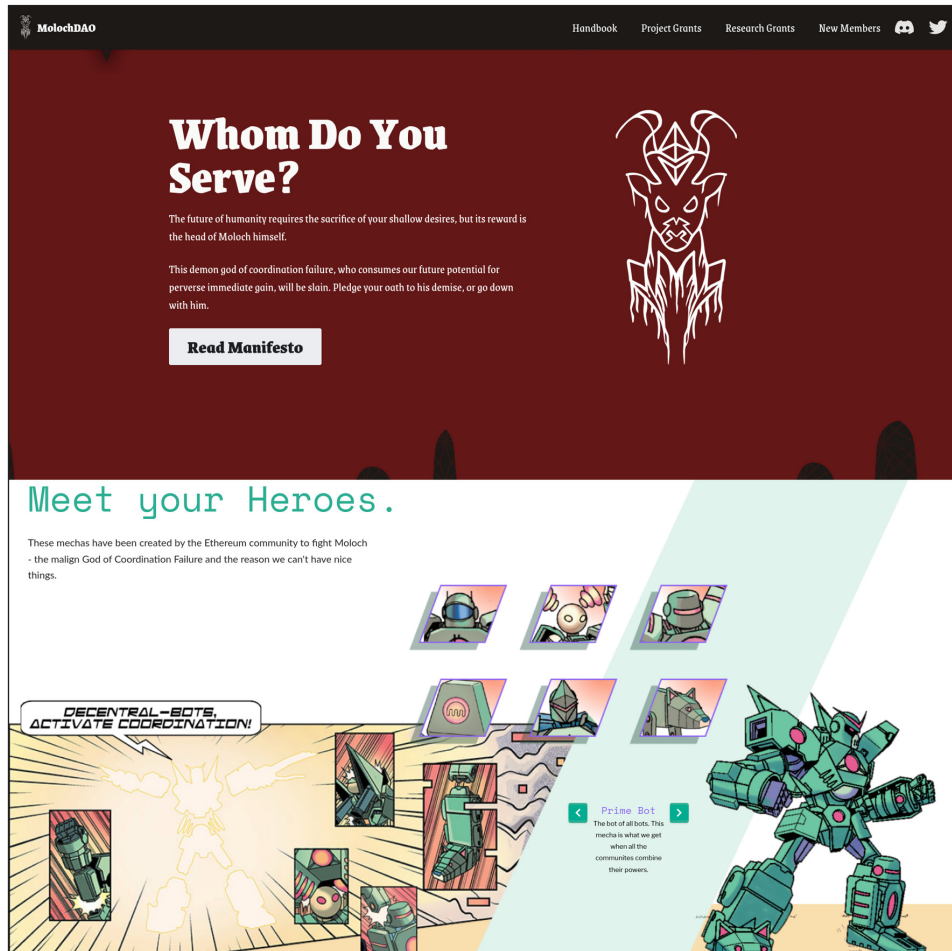
this reading in mind, the homepage for MolochDAO situates the DAO's participants in a cosmic, technology-aided showdown: "This demon god of coordination failure, who consumes our future potential for perverse immediate gain, will be slain. Pledge your oath to his demise, or go down with him" (MolochDAO, n.d.-a).

MolochDAO iconography, on its website and elsewhere, warns against too much seriousness about any of this. There are scary drawings of a horned god crowned with an Ethereum logo and a color scheme of black covered in dripping red blood. This depiction reflects the negative associations that tend to accompany the idol Moloch in societies heavily influenced by Christian traditions. Then comes a bright stock photo of people in office wear collaborating happily around a computer, with a bloody logo hastily added to the papers on their desk. The purpose appears to be not some literalistic belief in or against Moloch but a unifying mythology for a community in the crisis of an economic downturn, both a dead serious and inside joke. It served to organize the Ethereum community around a shared purpose, one not reducible to a token price or immediate use-value in the world as it is. As Soleimani puts it, "If you can't name your enemy, you can't fight them" (Soleimani, Twitter direct message to authors, January 12, 2023).

By the end of 2020, coronavirus-induced lockdowns began to fuel a speculative boom in crypto. Sales of non-fungible tokens (NFTs) tied to digital artworks led to an unprecedented rise in Ethereum's value. That year, the Moloch mythology took hold in another Ethereum-based DAO, Gitcoin. Like MolochDAO, Gitcoin's mission is to direct funds toward "public goods"—typically understood in these contexts as open-source software in the Ethereum ecosystem. To bring donations into its grant-making pool, Gitcoin produced a trio of comic books depicting the horned beast, determined to dis-coordinate the Earth, and doing battle against ETHbot, a neon-green, Transformers-style mechanical protagonist (Owocki 2021a, 2021b). The aesthetic was markedly different from MolochDAO's spooky black-and-red color scheme; Gitcoin paraphernalia emphasized the green robot, inviting people into the noble work of slaying Moloch rather than into the world of Moloch himself (Figure 1).

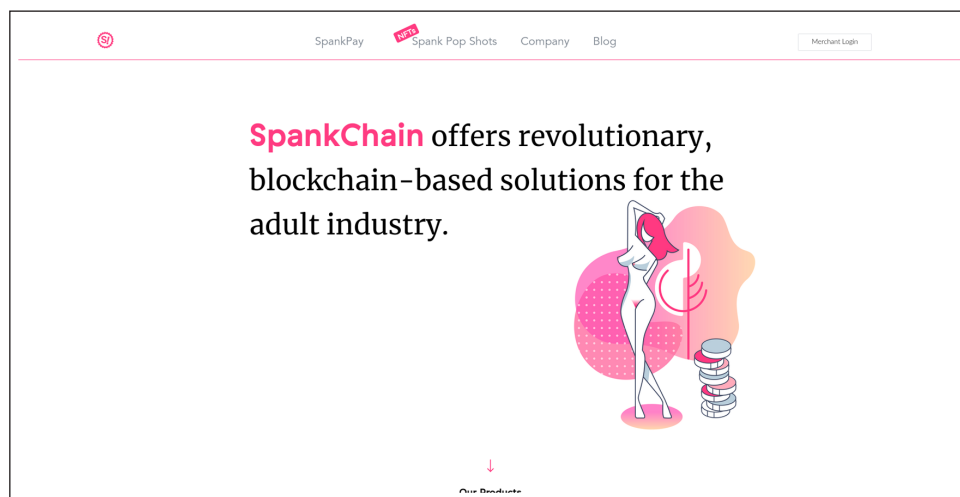
On the website [greatestlarp.com](https://greatestlarp.com), during the fall of 2021, Gitcoin orchestrated the sale of Moloch-themed NFTs, the proceeds of which would fund the matching pool for grants (Owocki 2021a). The reference to LARPing—live-action role playing—once again signaled that this cult of Moloch was not to be taken as a genuine religious movement. And yet, the performance raised genuine quantities of virtual money: 275.05 Ethereum tokens, or the equivalent of US\$494,034.13 when the sale ended on October 8.





**Figure 1:** Excerpts from the websites of MolochDAO (top) and the Greatest LARP (bottom) circa September 2022.

All the while, Soleimani had another project in the works. In 2017, he attempted to pitch the New York crypto venture fund where he worked, ConsenSys, on creating an “evil” branch in San Francisco. His slide deck included a drawing of Moloch accepting a child as sacrifice (Munster 2019). In a later deck introducing his new company, SpankChain, he explained that the most likely path to widespread consumer adoption of crypto would be through the kinds of activities that lend themselves to illicit subcultures. The drugs phase happened with the early Bitcoin marketplace Silk Road (Van Hout and Bingham 2014), and pornography was next. ConsenSys founder Joe Lubin told a reporter, “He wanted to do all the dark things” (Munster 2019). When Lubin did not support the proposal, Soleimani went West anyway. SpankChain initially launched as a webcam platform that enabled performers to host shows. The brand eventually grew to include a SpankChain-specific token, Booty. SpankChain raised the equivalent of US\$7.5 million in the 2017 “initial coin offering” craze—selling tokens to investors on the promise of a future product—and released a demo on the first day of 2018 (Figure 2).



**Figure 2:** The top of the SpankChain website, circa September 2022.

Despite the existence of over a dozen pornography-related crypto projects at the time (Klein 2018), SpankChain gained traction as the first to generate a meaningful user base (Cuen 2018). With help from advisors in the adult entertainment industry and a strong technical team, SpankChain drew over 700 performers and 4,000 users within a year of its initial release (Munster 2019). Soleimani's branding prowess became apparent as news of SpankChain appeared in outlets ranging from the industry website *Decrypt* (Munster 2019) to *Rolling Stone* (Barrett-Ibarria 2019). Adult entertainers and SpankChain advisors espoused the potential of blockchains to liberate sex workers from the discrimination of financial institutions. Major credit card companies and online payment processors have been known to reverse charges made for sex work or ban alleged sex workers from using their platforms (Barss 2010; Motherboard 2022; Barrett-Ibarria 2019). Gabi, a SpankChain ambassador and cam model, told one reporter, "I think SpankChain is on the cutting edge. It's trying to solve a lot of these problems that are rampant in the industry" (Barrett-Ibarria 2019). Multiple performers echoed this sentiment. In a SpankChain blog post, pornography performer Janice Griffith wrote, "[SpankChain] is going to change everything we know about how to run our businesses" (Griffith 2017).

Meanwhile, on crypto-centered podcasts and in publications, Soleimani repeatedly explained how the adult entertainment industry could demonstrate the potential of crypto across society. SpankChain garnered acceptance, notoriety, and faith from subsets of both the crypto and adult entertainment communities. In 2019, the company introduced SpankPay, a tool that enabled performers to accept crypto payments. SpankPay allowed performers to retain 99.5 percent of their earnings, in contrast to third-party payment processors that frequently charge a 10 percent fee from adult performers.

This part of the project, however, was short-lived. In March 2023, SpankPay shut down after Wyre Payments terminated its contract. The upstream payment

processor claimed SpankChain had violated the network's terms of service (Nelson 2023). SpankChain's cam site is no longer active, and as of early 2023, the combined value of SPANK, the utility token that can be used to generate Booty, had fallen from its all-time high of US\$178 million to US\$0. As of January 2024, SpankChain continues to operate SpankMatch, a professional networking platform for the adult entertainment industry, and SpankUniversity, an educational platform focused on sex-worker health, as well as political advocacy initiatives for the industry.

Meanwhile, MolochDAO's design and nomenclature became the basis of DAOHaus, a popular platform for creating—or “summoning”—new DAOs. In that way and more, the singular intervention became infrastructure. SpankChain was also an early adopter of “state channels” for payments, which allow many transactions to be packaged within just two transactions on the blockchain—an efficient technique that has since become an important part of the broader Ethereum ecosystem.

### **Belief, Infrastructure, and Perverse Attraction**

In an October 2020 podcast, Bitcoin founder Kevin Owocki and Soleimani riffed together on the Moloch mythology, during which Owocki spoke of “belief”:

If everyone went home and believed really hard in Bitcoin as a store of value, then it would win, immediately. And that is interesting, because it points out how much of these things are just based on belief. With Ethereum it's a little harder. It's not so much enough to believe in Ethereum. You also have to build useful stuff on it to get people to use it and then believe in it. (Soleimani and Owocki 2020, 00:33:22–00:34:07)

That is, as just a currency, Bitcoin could succeed on assent alone; but as an infrastructure for far more expansive applications, such as programmable contracts and entire organizations, Ethereum requires works as well as faith. Both MolochDAO and Bitcoin took that theory to heart as projects designed to funnel funds toward people who would build “public goods” with Ethereum (Soleimani and Owocki 2020). Both got their start at a time when faith seemed most necessary, during a severe downturn in the cryptocurrency market. They used the specter of Moloch, as the god of coordination failure, to motivate the “public goods” that could undergird faith in the nascent crypto infrastructure.

The idea that building infrastructure might have something to do with faith is not original to crypto. Scholar of religion and media Jenna Supp-Montgomery's book *When the Medium Was the Mission* (2021a), for instance, documents in detail how Evangelical Christian theology informed and motivated



the “infrastructuralist meaning” of telegraph lines, as well as other electronic communications networks. Writes Supp-Montgomerie (2021a, 23; emphasis added):

Cabled network media came into being tethered to a series of promises about the possibilities for technology, social life, the future, and communication. They were understood—*even before they worked*—as a brand-new technology that would create social unity in a flawless future through instantaneous, ubiquitous, frictionless communication. They were understood as connective and divine.

New infrastructures propose to make possible what was not possible before them. But infrastructures do not manifest their possibilities immediately or all at once. They are frequently subject to network effects (Katz and Shapiro 1994), whereby their value becomes evident only as they connect a large number of nodes. If there is only one road to drive on, most people will not see fit to buy a car; when roads cover the most desirable routes of travel, cars seem essential. From start to finish, the making of infrastructure is a matter of promulgating certain imaginaries. Kelsie Kabben characterizes crypto as “a collective exploration in ‘self-infrastructuring,’” an ongoing and prefigurative process (Nabben 2023, 1). For those outside crypto’s devoted subcultures, even its most basic infrastructures seem to remain in that stage of “even before they worked.” Using them requires patience and technical workarounds, motivated by a kind of faith that the new infrastructures will continue growing in power and someday overtake the old ones. Lana Swartz (2022) has gone so far as to suggest that the development of crypto infrastructure has amounted to a “network scam,” ultimately designed not to work but to extract from people who believe it will.

Bitcoin’s strategy surrounding Moloch was much like that of the telegraph missionaries Supp-Montgomerie has studied—an evangelical optimism based on the expectation of imminent triumph. While Bitcoin presented a hopeful story about people coming together, coordinating, and slaying Moloch, MolochDAO’s iconography bet on a kind of dark kinship. Both the idolatry of Moloch and the pornography of SpankChain reflect a theory that the best way to achieve the network effects necessary for functional infrastructure is to start in spaces that the dominant culture regards as illicit. This theory builds on the concept of “disruptive innovation,” canonical among technology startups, which holds that the most transformative businesses arise from once-marginal markets (Christensen, Raynor, and McDonald 2015). Perverse attraction adds the supposition that, in order to find those marginal subcultures of true-believing early adopters, the entrepreneur should identify dominant moral norms and subvert them.

### ***Perverse Precedents***

The strategy of perverse attraction, like that of evangelical optimism, has precedents. Well before SpankChain, observers noticed how pornography feeds the development and adoption of new technologies, from ancient sculpture and the printing press to VCRs and the internet (Barss 2010; P. Johnson 1996; Coopersmith 1998, 2000). In these accounts, pornography becomes a path for the adoption of new technologies precisely because of its existence outside the moral infrastructure. While the cost in time and resources of adopting a new technology may be prohibitive for most uses, advances in privacy and content delivery are worth the trouble for pornography. The more that dominant norms push pornography to the margins, the more pornography adopts this pioneering role.

For instance, pornography provided the basis for a flourishing magazine trade, attracting buyers and advertisers to converge around such titles (in the United States) as *Hustler*, *Penthouse*, and *Playboy*. These became among the most popular magazines during their peak in the mid-1970s, and they later were among the early success stories of the world wide web (Coopersmith 1998, 100). Meanwhile, by skirting (and pushing) the edge of what society considered pornography, the retail chain Victoria's Secret became a defining attractor for the late twentieth-century shopping mall (Juffer 1996; Stokrocki 2001).

"In the twenty-first century," journalist Patchen Barss (2010) finds, "the influence of the porn industry on new communications devices may still be dirty, but it is no longer a secret. It is part of the standard business model." Soleimani adopted this "standard business model" when he presented pornography as the next logical step for blockchain technology.

Soleimani's logic is also rooted in the affordances by which crypto could enable sex workers to gain greater agency and evade the repression that so often targets them. Blockchains introduce opportunities for enhancing privacy protections through the cryptography that is part of the underlying basis of the technology. And because cryptocurrencies themselves are rarely used and sometimes prohibited in mainstream economies, the speculative gains among early adopters mean that blockchains hold stores of financial value that cannot be easily spent above ground (De Filippi and Wright 2018; Corbet et al. 2018). This, paired with the relative insulation of the pornography trade, presents an opportunity to generate a multisided marketplace infrastructure without having to compete head-on with mainstream competitors. The appearance of perverse attraction in crypto thus attempts to leverage a well-established practice for a new kind of infrastructure.

### ***Perverse Attraction as a Strategy for Blockchains***

Soleimani has identified his infrastructure-building strategy with the management discourse of polarization-based marketing. He told one podcaster, for instance,

“The closer you get to fifty-fifty polarizing, the more viral you’re likely to go” (Draper 2018). Polarization marketing, generally, is based on the recognition that inserting a brand into an area of contention in society can draw intensity from the conflict, in turn intensifying the attention on the brand and some consumers’ attachment to it (Luo, Wiles, and Raithel 2013).

At risk of turning Soleimani against himself, however, we suggest that this is not what MolochDAO and SpankChain are doing. The god Moloch is not really a matter of widespread controversy in the twenty-first century; pornography sometimes stirs controversy but usually remains both widespread and out of public view. Rather, as Soleimani has also put it, his brands act as “memetic filters,” drawing together the specific audiences needed for each particular project: coordination-obsessed software developers, for instance, and people willing to use a new technology to access and produce pornography (Munster 2019). And yet, memetic filtering is only part of the strategy at hand.

Guided by the practice of Soleimani and his precursors, the strategy of perverse attraction involves several stages. First, it attracts participation into an infrastructure through the allure of the perverse, particularly among people most willing to depart from dominant infrastructures. Second, it bounds (or filters) that participation to the subcultures that dominant norms classify as perverse; this enables the infrastructure to develop around achieving self-sufficiency for a finite use-case, whose participants are willing to tolerate a work in progress. Third, the infrastructure deepens participant loyalty through the promise of empowerment, offering to render the perverse attractor no longer perverse nor marginal. Finally, success in serving a limited use-case attracts more widespread adoption, presumably to the point of superseding previously dominant infrastructures.

If building infrastructure is the overriding goal of perverse attraction, however, the strategy presents a quandary: As an infrastructure approaches mainstream adoption, what becomes of the people whom it enlists as perverse attractors? This question is particularly pressing to the extent that marginalized people become means toward an end other than their own survival and agency.

“I’m happy to be a porn tycoon,” Soleimani once told a reporter. “But the reason that I started Spank[C]hain was because I thought it was a good use-case for the technology” (Munster 2019).

### **Economies of Questionable Empowerment**

In their white paper introducing SpankChain, Soleimani and co-founder William Bentley de Vogelaere describe the project as an “alternative to discrimination” (Soleimani and de Vogelaere 2017, 3). Similarly, a 2017 blog post published by SpankChain promised in its headline to explain “How SpankChain Brings Power to Performers.” Soleimani frequently posts to his social media accounts about news and advocacy for sex-worker rights. Multiple pornography

performers have expressed hopes for what SpankChain might enable. Courtnei Demilune, for example, recounts her previous experiences of discrimination as a transgender woman in pornography, concluding, “Spank[C]hain provides a solution to all of this . . . They are empowering us with the infrastructure we need” (Demilune 2017).

Histories of economic innovation, however, show a pattern of entrepreneurs bestowing financial empowerment and increased visibility on marginalized communities only to rescind access when the image of perversion no longer serves the ambitions of the infrastructure. Future infrastructure builders, in turn, benefit from the continued marginalization of those in the pornography industry, as it generates opportunities for further innovation.

This is not to say that blockchains are devoid of potential to empower workers in the adult entertainment industry. Crypto platforms codesigned with and by sex workers—including SpankChain, WetSpace, and MintStars—have provoked meaningful conversations about establishing a more just technological ecosystem for people engaged in sex work (Barrett-Ibarria 2019; Sigalos 2022; Salmond and Deyoung 2022; Garcia et al. 2021). But when platform-building is motivated primarily by the potential for sex workers to engender infrastructure adoption—as opposed to the ability of infrastructures to mitigate the marginalization of sex workers—the benefits to sex workers tend to be short-lived.

The British company UKash, for instance, achieved early success as a payment processing system for online adult entertainment (Barss 2010). The company was initially founded as a digital payment method for gamblers in 2005. It struggled before turning to pornography. The continued marginalization of pornography enabled UKash to find a motivated user base—until it was acquired by the US-based company Skrill, which has since banned sex workers from the platform. This kind of transition has been common. As the online adult entertainment industry gained popularity, many financial institutions became wary of working with adult entertainers. By 2002, most major credit card companies had placed significant restrictions on processing payments for pornography or had stopped working with the industry altogether. This kind of systematic exclusion produces a gap in the market. It enables alternative infrastructures to emerge and innovate in response to the pornography industry’s demands. But that infrastructure is not ultimately controlled by, nor designed for, sex workers themselves. As legal scholar Zahra Stardust summarizes, “Sex workers [are] treated on the one hand as a source of profit and data, and on the other as collateral damage in an online gentrification project” (Blunt and Stardust 2021).

In March 2023, the SpankPay service was forced to suspend payments because its banking partner, Wyre, began using a third-party payment processor that regarded pornographic content as a violation of its rules. On Twitter,

pornography performer Ally Sparkles (2023) responded in a way that expressed both disappointment and persistent confidence in the liberating prospects of blockchain infrastructures: “What a shame. Hopefully you can build back in a more decentralized fashion.” SpankPay advisor and pornography performer Allie Eve Knox emphasized the power of blockchain technology when coupled with legislative reform. Knox (2023) wrote, “I joined Spank in 2017 [because sex workers] needed these tech tools. SpankPay can no longer exist under discrimination, but SpankChain will continue to support the community and build the tools we need. We are committed to making legislative change to secure our financial futures.”

### **Visibility and Perversity**

Perverse attraction promises visibility for new infrastructures, the entrepreneurs who market them, and the perverse attractors whose marginality produces appeal. However, visibility does not benefit all participants equally.

For instance, pornography magazine moguls such as Hugh Hefner and Larry Flynt gained celebrity status through their proximity to and perpetuation of perversion, as well as their ability to commercialize it. Through *Playboy* and *Hustler*, Hefner and Flynt developed reputations as iconoclasts and disrupters. They were able to leverage their social status and growing visibility to establish themselves as legitimate and successful businessmen operating in an unsavory industry (Voss 2015). In the infrastructure of American shopping malls, Les Wexner achieved similar status with Victoria’s Secret, at least until his downfall due to a longtime association with sex trafficker Jeffrey Epstein. Within the Ethereum subculture, Ameen Soleimani performs a role comparable to Hefner, Flynt, and Wexner, as both a purveyor of the perverse and a respected businessman.

This type of legitimization through perverse attraction, however, is often reserved for those with the ability to distance themselves from directly participating in deviance. Other participants do not have the option of distance. As Sarah Banet-Weiser (2018, 26) explains: “When the borders and boundaries of visibility are economized, ‘inclusion’ is about widening an already established set of norms. Thus, those who do not fit those norms because of difference become particularly vulnerable targets.” Visibility thus benefits those who can maintain a privileged distance from the work itself while amplifying the stigma of those who cannot.

Claims of empowerment through performer visibility have repeatedly been a political lobbying tactic for adult industry moguls in recent decades. In response to the impeachment of Bill Clinton, *Hustler* founder Larry Flynt offered US\$1 million to anyone willing to admit to having an illicit sexual encounter with a congressman or high-ranking United States official (Carlson 1998). Similarly, in 2018, SpankChain offered US\$25,000 to sex workers who were willing to



out congressional clients who had voted in favor of FOSTA-SESTA, a bill that further constrained sex workers' ability to advertise and work online (Cole 2018). Through economic and social capital, entrepreneurs leverage their role in a perverse industry for influence over legislators and powerful elites. It is unclear what lasting benefit accrues to those being asked to make themselves visible. As Melissa Gira Grant (2014, 25) writes, "[s]ex workers are called to give testimony on the nature of their work and lives in ever more venues: in secret diaries; on cable specials, opposite the 'disgraced' politicians who hire them . . . Very rarely does sharing anything in these venues serve them, or the public. Sex workers are there for the sake of some unseen owners' profits."

Perverse attraction thereby mirrors the tactics of popular feminism, in which visibility is asserted as synonymous with social change. While visibility can engender more widespread solidarity with stigmatized communities, it also threatens to reinforce their marginalization. As Banet-Weiser (2018, 26) explains, "Marginalized subjects . . . are punished and disciplined precisely when the spotlight falls on them." At least as much as it promises empowerment, visibility risks exposure to further surveillance and control. If visibility is not a means of direct ideological and structural change, it threatens to make the realities of marginality increasingly dangerous.

### ***Restigmatizing the Perverse***

When new infrastructures achieve mainstream adoption and perversion shifts from an attractor to a liability, companies frequently deny their affiliation with sex workers. The executives and corporations who are able to dictate visibility render those in front of the camera invisible by banning them from the very technologies that promised empowerment. As Patchen Barss (2010, 215) observes, "Following the pattern of dozens of pre-internet technologies, a widespread scrubbing of pornographic roots has begun, with many mainstream companies lapsing into silence or denial of their erotic ancestry."

CyberCash was established in 1994 as a means of simplifying and optimizing e-commerce. The company was a third-party payment processor that offered greater usability for credit card companies and e-commerce sites. CEO William Melton was forthright about the role of pornography in CyberCash's potential. He cited online gambling and adult entertainment as keys to CyberCash's success. CyberCash became a leading credit card verification service for the pornography industry before being hacked in 2000. The breach resulted in the downfall of CyberCash as an independent business, and it was consequently bought by VeriSign (Barss 2010, 254). In 2005, VeriSign was in turn acquired by PayPal, from which sex workers are now frequently barred. The SpankChain white paper, for instance, denounces PayPal as "notorious for closing the accounts of performers and seizing their funds" (Soleimani and de Vogelaere 2017, 3). Despite the role sex workers played in the mainstream adoption of PayPal's

constellation of services, dominant moral norms engender the exclusion of those industries from the company's current practices—re-stigmatizing them as perverse and illegitimate.

This is not an anomaly. Stardust (2020) explains, “To Big Tech, the sex worker is as indispensable as they are disposable.” Once new infrastructures achieve mass adoption, entrepreneurs and corporations tend to discard the people they claimed to be helping in favor of public approval. Because of this, the use of pornography as a perverse attractor risks enacting a form of misogyny that identifies the bodies of those in front of the camera as objects to be instrumentalized for the aspirations of entrepreneurs. Just as Moloch ultimately proves to be more mascot than god in the Ethereum community, tech entrepreneurs' empowerment of sex workers may be only a passing phase of an infrastructural strategy.

The Ethereum blockchain has yet to achieve mainstream adoption. It is possible that the decentralized, hard-to-regulate nature of Ethereum could enable a departure from past corporate behavior in relation to marginalized communities. If workers and customers control access to their own cryptocurrency wallets, and use smart contracts on a blockchain for transactions, state or corporate actors have no direct means to interfere. However, the Ethereum network remains vulnerable to censorship through the participants who validate transactions. Just as many validators have chosen not to accept transactions that violate United States sanctions, they also might face pressure to restrict transactions tied to sex work (Kessler and Young 2022). Soleimani has been an outspoken critic of such censorship.

Soleimani has insisted that SpankChain, at least, was designed to be permanently yoked to its mission: “We called the company [S]pank[C]hain precisely so we can never ‘pivot’ [or] dump adult performers should we grow bigger” (Soleimani, Twitter direct message to authors, January 12, 2023). Endorsements from numerous sex workers represent evidence for SpankChain's commitment to their interests. One model, River Sunshine, told a reporter, “I was making[,] on three sites combined, 6 percent of what I made in the same 30-day period on Spank[C]hain. I feel more in control of my money than I did using the banks and payment processors on other sites” (Cuen 2018). Despite multiple positive endorsements, sex workers do not express universal, uncritical praise for SpankChain. Technology reporter and sex worker Sam Cole explains:

[Blockchain technology] has so much potential. It could be this really beautiful, decentralized technology that could give people access to things that's almost irrevocable. It holds that promise, but at the same time that was the promise the internet held . . . so a lot of sex workers I know . . . are really cautious about putting too much trust or having too much hope about any new technology. (Motherboard 2022, 00:17:25)

SpankChain has successfully garnered the trust of many in the industry, yet there is still widespread hesitancy about the potential of crypto for sex work. Histories of infrastructure and pornography indicate a tendency in which practitioners of perverse attraction have ultimately harmed the people whose perversion was appropriated as cultural capital. Consideration and acknowledgement of these histories should guide participants in initiatives like SpankChain, serving as a reminder that infrastructural adoption and the power of precarious workers can turn from alignment to contradiction.

## Conclusion

This article has outlined the strategy of perverse attraction—a method of developing technological infrastructure through targeted subcultures based on inverting dominant moral norms. To illustrate this, it has considered the career of crypto entrepreneur Ameen Soleimani, who has employed the strategy in two projects, MolochDAO and SpankChain. It has further raised concerns about the consequences of this strategy for the people who become the perverse attractors, such as the people engaged in the production of pornography. Historical experience suggests that claims of empowerment may be short-lived, and that the goal of producing a kind of mainstream infrastructure typically involves further stigmatizing the people who were supposed to be empowered. The critical question at hand is whether the highest priority for entrepreneurs and organizations is the infrastructure or the people whose safety and livelihoods depend on it.

The concept of perverse attraction contributes to a growing set of conceptual resources in the study of infrastructure—particularly, in this case, in understanding strategies for developing infrastructures through entrepreneurship. We follow scholars such as Isaiah Ellis (2020) and Supp-Montgomerie (2021a) in recognizing that religious imaginaries (or, in this case, sacrilegious ones) can help produce a faith that animates still-incomplete infrastructure projects and draws people to them.

Finally, we hope this analysis surfaces useful insights—and causes for concern—among those tempted to employ perverse attraction for the making of infrastructure. We do not claim to have arrived at solutions that can save the strategy from itself. So long as the cause of infrastructure retains priority over the people involved, that cause carries the risk of turning against them.

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