The Tapestry project seeks to compose meaningful visual representations of events deemed newsworthy around the world. Tapestry realizes this objective through creative arrangement of images retrieved from online news sources. The collected images are woven into a virtual and continuously evolving composition in collage form.

Collage is a longstanding tradition for aggregating materials from different sources into a new composition, often to make a statement or to challenge the viewer’s perception of the contents. The word collage was first applied to this practice by Dada and Surrealist artists working in the early 20th century. Collage became a major Pop art form in the 1960s, when artist Robert Rauschenberg combined photographs collected from magazines and newspapers to create silk-screened amalgams of American history and popular culture.¹

More recently, the collage concept has been explored by numerous artists working in digital media. Our increasingly networked environment offers possibilities early collage artists didn’t have; compositions can be fluid and, in some cases, accept input from the viewer.

The following sections survey digital media collage interpretations that have some degree of conceptual or operational overlap with Tapestry. Where available, quotes from the producer’s description of the work are included to contextualize the work. Each section closes by highlighting one or more key differences between the cited work and the Tapestry project.

/abstraction/  •  Michael Takeo Magruder
http://www.takeo.org/archives/ar15.htm

/abstraction/ is a public space installation that was shown on the GMI video wall in London’s Leicester Square in early 2002. The display combined images and text randomly selected from international media to create a changing field of texture, light, and color. The installation incorporated information about its immediate surroundings by varying the composition according to the ambient visible spectrum.

“This visual array is only semi-abstract and even though the media itself provides the aesthetic essence of the work in terms of both image and substrate, the information which it contains is still discernible. This condition

compels the spectator to reflect upon the nature of the work as both a receptacle of knowledge and an aesthetic entity. The question is whether the mode of interaction now stimulates us as much as the information which is acquired, and if the process has become as indispensable as the outcome.”
—Michael Takeo Magruder

While /abstraction/ pulls images from Web-based media, its general interpretation of all types of content results in very broadly sketched compositions. Moreover, the unfocused nature of the information displayed is likely to favor a mixture of archival and topical content.

**googlehouse** • Marika Dermineur & Stéphane Degoutin
[http://www.incident.net/works/googlehouse/presentation.html](http://www.incident.net/works/googlehouse/presentation.html)

googlehouse builds a virtual 3D house using images extracted in real time from an image search engine. Users can choose to build a googlehouse by adding rooms from a standard list—bedrooms, living rooms, or bathrooms, for example—or they can enter their own more creative room names. A few of the most recently created room name categories persist for subsequent visitors. Googlehouse continues to expand the house it creates until the user leaves the page.

googlehouse provides an entertaining collage of room images, but it does little to make a statement or provide a catalyst for discussion or reflection. All keywords used for the image search, even those provided by the user, have the word “room” appended to them, and all images added are in some way related to a room. This is not a shortcoming for googlehouse, of course, but it accentuates the necessarily narrow scope of the work.

**Shredder 1.0** • Mark Napier

Shredder is billed as an alternative browsing experience. It reinterprets a single user-provided URL by through virtual shredding, a process that breaks up and redisplays images, source HTML, and other page content into an abstract composition.

"The web browser is an organ of perception through which we 'see' the web. It filters and organizes a huge mass of structured information that spans continents, is constantly growing, reorganizing itself, shifting its appearance, evolving. The Shredder presents this global structure as a chaotic, irrational, raucous collage. By altering the HTML code before the browser reads it, the Shredder appropriates the data of the web, transforming it into a parallel web. Content becomes abstraction. Text becomes graphics. Information becomes art.” — Mark Napier

Shredder reveals parts of Web pages most people don’t see: the text formatting controls, image tags, and links that form the pages. It also presents the results in collage style, in this case randomly placing and repeating content snippets within its screen space. Shredder works in single-shot fashion; when it completes its process, the collage remains static, picking up again only when the user provides another URL to shred.
LJ Image Collage  •  (author unknown)
http://www.deleteyourself.com/lj/lj_loader_about.html

LJ Image Collage creates collages using images posted by members of Livejournal, a popular blogging site. Images are sampled at random from members’ postings, so the resulting collage is dynamic and unpredictable. Images are posted in their original size, overlap, and are clickable. Clicking an image takes the user to the associated blog.

In general, the appeal of LJ Image Collage is limited to users of the Livejournal blogging service. It can also be of interest to non-members thinking of joining the service, but its random nature in particular means that casual and non-member viewers have little connection to the content of the collage.

combinFormation  •  Andruid Kerne, et al
http://ecologylab.cs.tamu.edu/combinFormation/

The authors of combinFormation (formerly Collage Machine) describe their work as a “generative information space for browsing, collecting, and organizing information samples from the net.” The resulting collage is displayed and evolves in the user’s browser window, where the user can make layout changes and choose images to favor or delete. The program monitors the user’s interaction to guide the content selection process. Images and text are alternatively resized, focused, sharpened, and reorganized based on user input and the program’s interpretation of user interest. If user interaction ceases, combinFormation continues to build the collage based on its learned model of user interests.

combinFormation’s primary goal is to create and evolve a user interest-focused collage of Web content, and it excels at this task. The program provides a nice set of iconic, tape recorder-like controls to refine content, set a text-to-image balance, and save or revisit compositions. While it meets its objective, however, the program’s very nature means the collages produced seldom step outside the user’s comfort zone. As a result, the program brings in few elements that may expand the viewer’s awareness beyond what would ordinarily result from a conventional, non-collaged Web browsing session.
The Tapestry Difference

The works surveyed above provide a glimpse into the range of collage interpretations possible within the digital media context. Most of these examples extract images and text to rearrange them into new and often abstract configurations.

On conceptual and functional levels, Tapestry shares the most common ground with the abstraction and combinFormation projects. But there are distinct and significant differences between Tapestry and all the works cited above.

Key Differentiators

A unique focus on news sources. Tapestry reveals the fabric of current events in near real time\(^2\) by employing a search set that includes hundreds of news sites from around the world, from large news conglomerates to small town newspapers. By casting a uniquely wide yet focused search net, Tapestry stands to create compositions simultaneously representative of multiple cultures, points of view, and spheres of awareness. A composition could well blend images related to prisoner abuse in Iraq with images of a comparatively innocuous tractor pull at an American Midwest county fair.

A compelling image-only collage. Images have profound effects on us and can evoke the entire range of human emotion and reaction. We ascribe significant power to the images we encounter in the realm of popular culture, news, and art—including, for example, the power to calm or incite action, the power to convince or convulse, and the power to repulse or please.\(^3\)

Tapestry capitalizes on our visceral connection to images by presenting image-based amalgams of world events in meaningful arrangements. The broad search set naturally produces trends—as when a single story dominates the news—as well as interesting chance juxtapositions. A recent run of Tapestry during the time Edvard Munch’s The Scream painting was stolen produced a highly compelling collage of this iconic figure alongside images of fighting in Iraq.

Targeted selection focus with very broad appeal. Tapestry’s worldwide news focus gives viewers of all types something with which to connect. Because it’s not specifically tracking user interest, it provides images and a composition a user may not see through conventional browsing sessions or through collages created via other means.

Compositions as catalysts for discussion and reflection. Tapestry’s compositions may be visually striking, but they should also evoke questions in viewers’ minds: Is this how the world really is? Does this match my perception of what’s happening in the world? If not, how and why is it different? Does this reveal something new? Is my day-to-day field of view obscuring certain events? Is the result jarring or affirming?

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\(^2\) As soon as images are posted to news sources.

The Need for Tapestry

Tapestry exposes what is otherwise invisible to us. It synthesizes a world view from a far broader range of globally dispersed news sources than any one person or community can reasonably access. Tapestry therefore stands to reveal an unprecedented and near simultaneous view of world events. The work takes a media critique approach to considering the way images are employed by news services, how we consume them, and what that means for the perceived state of the world.

The near-present compositions Tapestry affords would have been impossible to create before the advent of the Internet. The increasing prevalence of high-speed networks and net-connected news sources creates exciting and compelling possibilities.

Tapestry’s compositions are dynamic, and specific groupings are ephemeral. In general, if a composition at any given moment closely resembles a viewer’s perception of the world, the likely reason is that a particular event—specific terrorist attacks or significant natural disasters—are dominating the news at that specific moment in time. A viewing naturally leads us to question how the evolution of images—in this or other media—recast or reshape our conceptions.

Reminiscent of Robert Rauschenberg’s work, Tapestry produces dynamic and evolving amalgams of world history and popular culture in the making. But unlike prior collage work, which is static once created, Tapestry evolves to always reflect the history of the moment.

Remaining Challenges

The Tapestry project is designed for viewing in large common and public spaces suitable for projection or large-scale displays. Among the remaining challenges is the study and determination of an exact methodology through which the images will be contextualized.

Relevant research questions remain about how to best handle highly repeated images, how to scale their recirculation within social and cultural contexts, and how to tune Tapestry’s own search and display algorithms to avoid inadvertent skewing of the displayed image content set.