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Author(s): Jorge Lucero and Tyson E. Lewis

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Wallowing in Weird Passions: A Conversation on Art, Collecting, and Studying with Jorge Lucero and Tyson E. Lewis

Jorge Lucero University of Illinois Tyson E. Lewis University of North Texas

#### Tyson:

First off, I would like to thank you, Jorge, for this opportunity to discuss the relationship between collecting, art, and studying. It seems like an odd ménage à trois, does it not? What could possibly "attract" these three activities to one another? Or, perhaps the proper metaphor would be the knot . . . What kind of knot binds the three together? And ever stranger: I have never met you. We have only exchanged one or two e-mails about this vague thing called collecting. Yet these exchanges were enough to knot us together. Thus, at the beginning of this discussion, we already find a series of entanglements—passionate entanglements. I am sure we will find more.

To begin the conversation, I want to create a knot with two loops (collecting and study), and then add a third (art). An entry point for me into this topic came from reading The Arcades Project by Walter Benjamin (2002). In this epic, sprawling, unfinished text that charts the rise and fall of the arcades in 19thcentury Paris, Benjamin makes the following rather brief and elusive observation: "Collecting is a primal phenomenon of study: the student collects knowledge" (Benjamin, 2002, p. 210). There are several aspects of this citation that have been important to me, especially for my book On Study: Giorgio Agamben and Educational Potentiality (2013). First, collecting is a primal phenomenon of study. This means that collecting is essential and foundational to any theory and practice of study. Second, it is important that Benjamin focuses here on study. In much of my scholarship, I have attempted to define study as a particular form of educa-

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tion that is not reducible to learning (Lewis, 2013). Here, I would like to define learning as the economic management of one's education in terms of measurable outputs, predetermined assessments, and metrics of growth/development that can be verified through testing. When we learn, we are looking for evidence of improvement, and we are always trying to capture this improvement in the form of measurement. But to study something is, first and foremost, to suspend the ends of learning, and thus experience education as a pure means, as a form of life without definable measure. What is compelling to me about Benjamin's formula is that collecting is also characterized as a form of indefinite suspension. He writes; "One may start from the fact that the true collector detaches the object from its functional relations" (2002, p. 207). The functional relations referred to here concern practical uses (records are used for listening to music, and toys are used for playing) and economic exchange (records and toys are bought and sold for money). The collector takes objects out of circulation and places them in suspended animation where they can be contemplated/studied. Indeed, Benjamin is clear that the collector and the bibliophile are distinct in that the former engages in "disinterested contemplation" (2002, p. 207) whereas the latter still reads and uses his or her books according to their intended functions.

So, in this sense, the activity of suspending use and exchange unite the collector and the studier. Collectors and studiers are not interested in use value or exchange value. But what exactly is the studier collecting? Benjamin replies: knowledge, of course! Yes, but what kind of knowledge is at stake here? We could argue that the learner also collects knowledge (which is then displayed in a collection of degrees, diplomas, and certifications all proving that something has been learned, that cultural capital has been amassed). Here, we get to the connection between collecting and art. Benjamin argues that the deepest passion of the collector (and also the studier) is allegory. He emphasizes that "in every collector hides an allegorist, and in every allegorist a collector" (2002, p. 211). At first, this might seem strange: the collector brings things together that belong together (we can think here of collectors who have separate rooms for thematically grouped objects) whereas the allegorist brings together things that do not appear to belong together (we can think here of the allegorist as a kind of surrealist who is constantly engaged in the process of dislodging objects and reassembling them into esoteric constellations that lack a transparent and easily recognizable key/solution). Yet for Benjamin, the collector's collection is never complete and always remains an open network of references, and the allegorist is always engaged in collecting more things for his or her constellation (which has to be arranged just so).

We can thus unpack Benjamin's original formulation and re-write it as such: the collector suspends the functional use of objects so that they may be studied

as remnants of allegorical knowledge (poetic knowledge). What this knowledge means and how it operates are open questions.

In short, there is an educational side to collecting (studying) and a poetic/ artistic side (allegory). It is this knot that fascinates me, and ultimately led me to your work, Jorge, and in particular your STUDYCOLLECTION. I am thus wondering, from the perspective of an artist and educator, what inspired you to tie the knot between studying and collecting?

### Jorge:

Tyson! It's funny because I think we first thought that this exchange would be conducted as a conversation and it would—not only have that tone—but perhaps the immediacy of that type of back and forth. I'm afraid I've sabotaged the form already (or at least the intention) by taking so long to send you my response. The truth is that I've read your initial writing more than 10 times, and every time I've read it, I've crafted a different set of words in response to what you've written. I'm not sure what you'll make of this, but your very last sentence—the one where you wonder "what inspired [me] to tie the knot between studying and collecting"—has eluded me until the 10th reading! As I read it yet again, I was struck by the simplicity of your question, and I wondered to myself why I hadn't taken this sentence as my cue from where to begin my response to you. Without overthinking it, I imagine that I got stuck trying to respond to your thoughts on Benjamin and therefore missed the query that would have made this process as immediate as we had first imagined it. So, if you'll allow me, I will go about the business of answering this question, and perhaps I might even touch on some of the other things you've brought up, most of which I happen to agree with. At the end of this response, I will also offer you a question that perhaps will then be your prompt to continue the dialogue.

So you ask what inspired me to bring studying and collecting together, and I will answer with the third strand of our braid, which is art; and in particular the surreal—constant—engagement "of dislodging objects and reassembling them into esoteric constellations that lack a transparent and easily recognizable key/solution." I collect, study, and make art mostly through a very basic collage gesture. I've been an artist for as long as I remember, and, thanks to my parents, who always let me keep my room the way I wanted to, I've spent the better part of my life threading these three strands together within the confines of my lived-in "private" spaces (e.g., bedroom, office). Since I can remember, I have collected, arranged, rearranged, and contemplated those arranged collections. I didn't have any brothers—only sisters—and I remember spending a lot of time alone in my bedroom. I continuously made whole-room installations, perhaps permitted in my

imagination by the dioramas I saw as a child at the Field Museum and the Museum of Science and Industry in Chicago, as well as a good dose of the visuals in Pee-wee's Playhouse and Mexican churches.

I was a bad student most of my K-12 experience, but the "things" that I learned most easily and that ended up being the most fruitful, in terms of the development of my intellect and artistic trajectory, were the things that had to do with groupings of information that could then be reassembled to tell stories, spell words, make art, or imagine other worlds. For example, I was bad at taking tests and doing homework, but I was fascinated whenever we studied Greek mythology, Animal Kingdoms, the periodic table, and phonics/word roots. Perhaps at the time I couldn't articulate why I enjoyed those parts of my schooling, but now I know that there was a taxonomic parallel between those modular collections of knowledge and my Star Wars action figure collection, my Garbage Pail Kids trading cards, my massive cassette and CD collection (with pristinely cared-for jewel cases and covers), and my collection of miniature NFL helmets. I liked it when things were modular and could be rearranged, paired, compared and contrasted, and installed. I liked the internal logic and histories that collecting engendered.

Much later, when I got to art school, my fascination with piles, arrangements, grids, installations, displays, bookshelves, multiples, and even art historical groupings (e.g., -isms) continued, and I took photographs of color-coordinated displays of shirts at the Gap, dioramas in museums, planes parked at O'Hare Airport, things that came in bags, tile patterns, and many, many piles/shelves of books. Again, the fascination came partially because of the "look" of the collections, but mostly because of their potential to be reconfigured into nonsensical groupings, and therefore contemplated.

There is this custom for artists who work out of the studio to have a wall of arranged images and other "study" materials that will eventually make their way somehow into their artwork. At the School of the Art Institute (SAIC)—during my undergraduate study—everyone had a little corner where an artist might have hung postcards of things they had been looking at, cutouts from magazines, swatches of fabric, bits of found garbage, pictures of loved ones, and anything else that the artist could point to as source material. It's a kind of "inspiration wall" or wall of study if you will. It is the part of the studio/study that really made the space a space for contemplation—contemplation that eventually led to "poesis" of some kind or another (sometimes in art objects, sometimes in the way art objects were spoken about). These study/inspiration arrangements call my attention to this day! I frequently walk into an artist's studio and—as much as I'm there to look at what the artist is making—we eventually have a conversation about these "bits" and how the study of those bits has led to whatever is being made for the

"outside" world. Almost always, near this wall of study, there is also a collection of books that the artist is looking at or reading, and that sort of brings it full circle, doesn't it?

In the second year of my undergraduate studies, a professor took us to the Roger Brown Study Collection (RBSC), an artist's house that was donated to SAIC when the Chicago painter Roger Brown passed away. The thing about the RBSC is that it is Roger Brown's house as he left it on the day that he died. It has his entire collection on display as he installed it, and it is quite a collection. Roger Brown, like many other Chicago painters who studied at SAIC in the 1960s, was an adamant collector of pop culture objects, quirky furniture, art made by socalled outsider or unschooled artists, hand painted signs and posters, art works made by his contemporaries through the four decades of his career, and other types of ephemera somehow connected to his work (from a life-sized ceramic bust of Elvis to enormous freak show banners). This house blew me away, and I have returned to it countless times both as an artist and as an educator. The house—for all intents and purposes—is a museum, a Study Collection that no matter how many times I visit it, reveals itself to me in new ways every time. Aggregates that have this type of "aliveness" are—for me—the epitome of how art can impact. What I mean here is that an aggregate of different but related parts eventually emits a force that is porous enough to prove itself irresistible to a wide audience. This happens because there are many ways to "enter" the aggregate, and every person who encounters "it" will encounter it from wherever they encounter it from.

So that brings me to THEJORGELUCEROSTUDYCOLLECTION, which is a roving collection currently housed in the office I've been allotted at the University of Illinois as I serve on the faculty of Art Education. THESTUDY-COLLECTION is actually named after the Roger Brown Study Collection and, more poignantly, after this long-term relationship I've had with accumulation, installation, and contemplation. As an artist who thinks of pedagogy as material, I open the space once a week to the public in order to see if collecting, installation, and contemplation is a means to connect with people over long periods of time. The space has no rules of engagement other than that visitors must visit. How many times and to what level of engagement a visit is made is purposefully indeterminate.

Remember—way back when you sent me your introductory statement—that I mentioned that something related to our conversation happened to me almost immediately after the Spring 2017 semester concluded? What it was, was that I was given Jonathan Fineberg's entire art magazine archive. You might be familiar with Fineberg as the pre-eminent historian of art since the 1940s. Fineberg literally wrote the book on "it," *Art Since 1940: Strategies of Being.* He used to be



Figure 1.

a professor here at the University of Illinois; he retired a few years ago and now that he's moving to Philadelphia, he's unloading some of his collections. Fineberg and I don't know each other that well—he was going out as I was coming in—but he heard that I had a "project" that foregrounded collecting for study/art's sake, and he asked if I'd be interested in taking this archive off his hands. Fineberg's collection consists of 50 years worth of Art in America, ArtForum, ArtNews, New Art Examiner, Art Journal, Raw Vision, Art International, and others. Fifty years! I'm including a picture (Figure 1) so you can see what it looks like stacked in the JORGELUCEROSTUDYCOLLECTION.

To say that inheriting this comprehensive archive is fortuitous would be an understatement, not only because of this conversation you and I are having, but also because my first post-tenure exhibition is coming up later this month, and, until I received this gift, I was still unclear about what I was going to show. On the night that I picked up the collection from Fineberg's house, I realized that I had to show the collection itself and that I had to tie it to this conversation that we're having. It was just such an absurd amount of magazines! They exist first and foremost as a mass, an accumulated pile to behold, but then they can be reconfigured and set up—in some way—for contemplation's sake (dare I say, for art's sake!).

To be frank, I'm not sure how substantive the piece will be, but I'm currently turning it over in my mind, hoping that by the time the show comes around, I'll have tightened it up conceptually and formally in a manner that is integral with what I'm currently working on in my practice. Right now, the piece consists of low bookshelves that form a rectangular bunker of sorts (see drawing). All bookshelves will face the inside of the rectangle so that from the outside, the installation merely looks like a minimalist structure. In the center of this bunker, there will be a table with rolling chairs. Currently I am struggling with making/ showing an artwork—this magazine archive that is—with a clear nod to the accumulation of "wealth," particularly the accumulation of inherited wealth. I'm having a problem with showing it without criticality even though showing as-is is the only way I want to show it. What I mean is that I don't want to show it with a "twist" or a punch line; I just want to show as an interactive collection of magazines. Perhaps I'm drawn to showing it unadulterated because working through the difficulties of the piece for the audience is much easier than waiting to see how people will respond to it. Fineberg's magazine archive is now a part of the IORGELUCEROSTUDYCOLLECTION, and this is the first time I am deliberately extracting any part of the STUDYCOLLECTION for public exhibition. Mostly people see the collection by coming to it. I rarely lend from it, and I don't hold events at it. I just open it and let people come, and most of the time no one does.

THESTUDYCOLLECTION is, after all, an academic office. I bring that up as a means to touch on your points about collecting as suspension for the sake of studying; and as a potentially allegorical object. When I was given the job here at the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign (UIUC), I was asked—as most of my studio practicing colleagues are—if I would like to have a studio (away from the main part of campus) and a shared office in the main Art + Design building or if I would like to not have a studio and instead have a whole office to myself in the Art + Design building. Having been trained as a studio practitioner, I considered taking the "away" studio with the shared office, but I also liked the challenge of making all of my "work" out of an office. I felt that working out of an office was in line with the way that I had been thinking about how to make art out of and through one's teaching practice. I also wanted to stay away from the romance of the studio, even though it was being offered to me on an ivory platter!

Once in the office, without a studio, but still with the enculturated desire to make art by manipulating physical materials, I was left with the challenge of making the office a studio of sorts, and I wanted to capitalize on the estudio aspect of the studio. As you know, estudio is how you say "study" in Spanish. All the while,

I didn't want the *estudio* to be a study, meaning a place of reclusion for the sake of *mere* contemplation. I wanted to activate what contemplation could mean. Yes, I wanted the slowness, meditative aspects, and retreading of our old notions of contemplation to be accessible in the study collection, but I also wanted to introduce questioning, conversation, collaboration, play, and collage as forms of contemplative behavior.

I think it's true, what you state about this "weird passion" we share for collecting, art, and study. My favorite thing about where those three things knot together is the "slowness" and invisibility that emerges from their intersection, but also the relationality that seems to be emerging in our exercise here. What I mean by slowness and invisibility is that both collecting and study are processes/ actions that push the boundaries of *documentability*, and this expansion of the form propelled by accumulation, the passing of time, and the deliberate and constant retreading that is required by both collecting and study makes it impossible to "capture" what is being enacted/created. This impossible task is absurd to the point of becoming art. And in the end, I also think there is the potential to make something that has never been made before—some new art—because of the difficulties presented by this unwieldy form. So I leave you with this query as a means to further our conversation: What new things come from such old behaviors?

I look forward to hearing from you, and I think now that I have the juices flowing, this process will move along much faster. Tyson, thanks for being so patient with me. I look forward to our first meeting, and I look forward to hearing from you at your earliest convenience!

Take care—Jorge

#### Tyson:

Thanks for this response, Jorge. And now it is my turn to come clean: I, too, am a compulsive collector. As far back as I can remember, I have been interested in collecting. Certainly, this comes from my father who has amassed a number of oddball collections, including a collection of seashells, railroad ties, guitars, and other knickknacks that fill all the nooks and crannies of my parents' house. As for me, I collect Star Wars (yes, I, too, am a Star Wars fan . . . and an only child to boot) as well as obscure books and comics. Also, this interest in collecting has greatly shaped my intellectual pursuits. I am interested in Benjamin precisely because he was an avid collector of everything from old toys, to postcards, to children's word games. He carefully catalogued and archived everything. Likewise, I am fascinated Aby Warburg, who was another German scholar/collector working in the early part of the 20th century. His unfinished "Mnemosyne Atlas" crosses boundaries between art and research in interesting ways. It is an

eclectic compendium of images juxtaposed next to one another in order to illuminate the afterlife of Renaissance images on contemporary life. Warburg was a key inspiration for Benjamin, and his unusual habits clearly tie together allegory, study, and collecting. As such, collecting is a theme that runs throughout the personal and public dimensions of my life and work.

I am glad you picked up on the phrase "weird passion." This phrase is really important to me. Weirdness is the sensation that something that should not be there suddenly is there. Thus, when someone says "Hey, that is weird!," it means that something appears when or where it does not belong. Collecting is weird in the sense that the collector is particularly attuned to the lives of things that others would completely ignore. Things call to the collector in vivid ways. I am thinking here of going to yard sales with my father. Whereas I would quickly glance over piles of stuff, scanning the horizon quickly for things that concerned me and my interests, and then moving on, he would spend interminable amounts of time carefully surveying everything, picking up obscure objects, gazing at them, turning them around in his hands, asking questions, and so on. As this personal anecdote demonstrates, while others would simply continue on their way, carrying out their business, the collector is interrupted by the sudden presence of things. My father, as a collector, is continually distracted by all sorts of things. . . . He is wrapped up in the weirdness of things. Thus, it is impossible to know exactly what he might bring home any given weekend from his trips to yard sales and to thrift stores, nor is it possible to predict the kinds of allegorical connections he will find between old western novels and German figurines.

Collectors cannot ignore things and the thingliness of things. This means that things interrupt our personal interests and our initial intentions. And this is why collecting is a passion. A passion is just as much an active intention or interest that we control as it is a passive affliction. Once things start calling, it is hard to shut them up! Thus, a passion is not something reducible to will or intellect alone. It is instead something that sucks us in; we have to yield to it. The invisible threads that tie collectors to things cannot be easily cut without doing some kind of damage.

Passions, studying, collecting: they all seem indeterminate. As Benjamin writes, and as you suggest, there is a slowness that makes these activities or states of being unquantifiable. The passion is endless. Studying, Giorgio Agamben (1995) once said, loses any sense of its own end, and, more importantly, "does not even desire one" (p. 64). Thus, the suspension of ends that characterizes art, studying, and collecting lends itself to a kind of excess that cannot be adequately measured. Whereas learning concerns documentation—of intentions, aptitudes, and outcomes—the studying-collecting-art knot deactivates apparatuses of

documentation. We are left with a different temporality for defining action. Of course, this all too easily falls under the radar of educational institutions interested in learning (inputs and outputs). In fact, from the perspective of learning, it might very well be the case that collecting, studying, and art have very little educational value.

When you ask "What new things come from this passion?," I am somewhat reluctant to answer. Orienting us toward questions of outputs and outcomes could be read as inserting the logic of learning back into the equation, as learning concerns what happens and how we can recognize it. Instead of always turning toward what happens, I am more concerned with what is happening in the passionate moment. To me, this is really what studying is all about: dwelling in the slow rhythm of a collection, finding allegorical connections that never end. Thus, emphasis shifts from the new things produced to the *potentiality* for new things, and the living with this potentiality. Take, for instance, Fineberg's collection that you inherited. I agree with you that it is an "absurd amount of magazines" that can be rearranged in any number of ways to provoke different kinds of encounters or meanings. As such, the collection is a potentiality. It is not that it is meaningless or that it is meaningful, rather, what you are feeling is the vibrancy of the mass to potentially have meaning. But instead of giving it meaning—this is what it means to Fineberg or to Jorge Lucero—what I am most interested in is how you can exhibit its potentiality for meaning as such. Thus, the collection, as it stands, is not a new thing. . . . Rather, it offers a glimpse at a potentiality for new things. We are merely invited to slow down and dwell with the potentiality that is inherited from the past. This is study study prefers not to give way on this potentiality.

How can art education become a space and time for slow, weird passions, for experiencing potentiality released from an end? Perhaps the studio as study space is the key here. This would mean that artists and art educators have to think carefully about the educational logic of the spaces in which they work and teach. For instance, I am concerned that within the discourses of creative industries, art is reduced to the learning of marketable skills and identifiable talents. Certainly, art can be made to cultivate and test talents. Art can help us put talent to work. But if we recognize a distinction between learning *for* the development of talents and studying *as* the suspension of talents, then an alternative opens up, a different mode of educational life that prefers not to abide by the logic of learning. This kind of life is precarious precisely because it does not play by the rules of learning wherein individuals are recognized in relation to what they produce and what can be measured. This life would be defined by weird passions instead of marketable skills.

If studying can be a kind of slow, indefinite refusal of neoliberal creative industries, then what role can collecting play in reclaiming the studio as a study space?

Best, Tyson

## Jorge:

Tyson! You got me! You caught me using a convenient yet sloppily considered word, "new"! I think what I was edging us toward with my question about "what new emerges from these weird passions" was less about newness (in a productivity/attainment/finishing sense) and more about what surprising interruption to the status quo emerges and becomes useful to those of us who desire the slowness and wallowing that you and I are suggesting might be studying, art, and active collecting. Nevertheless, I'm glad I asked you to look for the "new" because of your points on potentiality, which makes me feel like "things"—whatever we're contemplating or spending time with . . . whatever we weird (I'm using it as a verb here)—can, at any moment ooze, implode, radiate, burst, breathe, or—in some other way—come alive in our presence.

I'm purposefully using the clunky term "wallowing" because I just found out that it doesn't primarily mean lingering in something negative, as in the phrase "wallowing in your sorrow," but rather it is firstly related to a relaxed, "unrestrained pleasure" in something abundant. Online dictionaries use the example of a hog in mud! Now in order for this wallowing to occur, we must make available the spaces where this type of unrestrained aliveness is possible, no? Enter here your point about the studio and its role in the engendering of this potentiality. Of course, we're not just talking about physical studio/estudios here, right? Taking a relatively conventional definition of the artist studio, I think we can understand that "space" as any site where the pliability of materials is being tested. Here, pliability just means attempted bending; in the end, it is not important whether or not the material was actually made pliable. In this definition, material is anything that the artist deems worthy of dedicating resources to, to test its pliability. The material—of course—could be any conventional art material (e.g., clay to code), but material can also be the seemingly nonpliable of the everyday (e.g., bureaucracies, institutions, spirits, immeasurable swaths of time), meaning things whose potential pliability hasn't even occurred to us. Tyson, I wonder what you'll make of this, but I often think that art educators can't go into this realm of non-sense (or slow sense) because they/we have too specific a definition of what art is, and that definition is that art is overall subjective and therefore can't actually be defined cleanly. I happen to think that art has a very clean definition and it's not just the

generic "everything can be art"; rather—through a historical examination of artists who have tested the extremes of the "what is art" question—I've arrived at the conclusion that art is when an artist tests the pliability of a material in the name of art. This—as per my examples above—could be either physical or conceptual materiality and is not reliant on mastery, visibility, or its connection to the history of art. It may in the end only be dependent on intent. Is it too trite to say that even though the cliché "everything is art" is not good enough to define art, the statement "art is what an artist labels art" is? I wonder if a more concrete definition of what art can be can make us less fearful as educators and creative practitioners?

I look forward to your thoughts on the matter.

Take care—Jorge

Tyson:

Hi Jorge,

I am really interested in your notion of pliability, as it would seem to be a very material way of approaching the question of potentiality. Indeed, I like the idea of pliability knowledge much more than poetic knowledge, as the poetic is not as directly tied to the stuff of collecting and art. Merging our two discourses, I think we could say that pliability is the potentiality of things to be somehow different from themselves. Take, for instance, your unique approach to your office space. Instead of simply utilizing the space for intended purposes, you experimented with its pliability, transforming it into a studio with alternative uses. To unlock the pliability of the space, you (a) suspended its everyday uses and then (b) experimented with the potentiality that remained within this space and time (the excess of potentiality above and beyond the functionality of the office as an office). Thus, the office is not simply utilized, but nor was it negated or destroyed. Rather, its pliability was opened up and "tested."

Here, I am thinking of pliability in a Benjaminian way: as a kind of virtual excess beyond measure, beyond proper testing. In the book *Benjamin's -Abilities* (2008), Samuel Weber focuses on the peculiar affinity Benjamin had for the suffix "-ability" (-barkeit). Things like "translatability" are interesting to Weber because they indicate a possibility that is neither present nor absent. An "-ability" is therefore a "structural possibility" that is "potentially at work even there where it seems factually not to have occurred" (Weber, 2008, p. 6). In this sense, pliability cannot be tested in a scientific way (quantified) but in a poetic way (unquantifiable). This would be a test as not a test (Backer & Lewis, 2015)—a test that exposes the weird, material existence of potentiality precisely where we did not anticipate it (like in your office). We cannot learn anything from this test. Instead, we can study what remains in the wake of learning. I like the idea

that art tests the pliability of materials . . . but only insofar as we understand that this test does not measure pli-ability so much as wallows in it.

And with that, I am going to sign off. While I often say that one can only study with friends, I think that this little experiment of ours has actually revealed something else to me: that through studying, friendships can emerge. Of course, such friendships will be weird, but that might, in the end, be the true source of their pleasure.

Ciao mio amico, Tyson

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