When we hear the word ‘meme’, we all hae a different reaction. Some will likely imagine a classic, template style meme like ‘grumpy cat’ or ‘bad luck brian’. Others might think of twitter gifs, catchy sayings from viral videos, or funny photoshopped images. And many others will simply be completely unfamiliar with the concept of a meme. It's clear that the definition of a ‘meme’ is not set in stone, and shifts as technology continues to evolve. This audio essay will take you through some of this evololution, what made early memes popular, the connection between the the internet and the rise of memes, and what makes a meme successful or viral.

The term *meme* was first coined by Richard Dawkins in his 1976 book *The Selfish Gene*. He defined a meme as something that “conveys the idea of a unit of cultural transmission, or a unit of imitation,” (Dawkins 192). Dawkins’ idea of a meme was centered around passing along culture in the form of things like song melodies or art styles. Memes as we now understand them began to change in the mid-1990s, when the internet and online message boards produced some of the most iconic and popular memes of all time, including “LOLcats”, template memes like “bad luck Brian” and “overly obsessed girlfriend,” and “rickrolling”. These memes were so successful because they were easy to understand and relate to, and usually succeeded in making people who had never seen them before laugh.

Our current understanding of memes, could not exist without the development of the internet. Memes are essentially just an inside joke shared among a large group of people, and the internet is a perfect facilitator to bring large groups of people together. Knowing the context of a meme can help people feel like they belong within a social group, even a social group as large as the internet.

This ability to be shared allows some memes to go viral. Often, the circumstances that cause a meme to ‘go viral’, are more hard to pin down. - Sometimes the person responsible for the meme’s creation did not necessarily intend for the meme to become so popular. In the ‘ecosystem’ of memes across the internet, memes that maintain their relevance will be more likely to be cemented as a ‘successful meme’ (Quartz article). In general, there is almost no way to confidently predict whether a given meme will go viral or not. Several things that can help increase a memes odds of going viral include being relatable to a large amount of people, and being shared by a person with a large amount of influence, especially within internet circles.