

*“...I made
this and
I love it...”*

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Hidden Meaning

From lovable droids to spinning web pages, Easter eggs are the playful bits of buried treasure that can forge a more emotional connection between brands and consumers.

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Close Encounters of the *Third Kind* is Steven Spielberg's classic sci-fi film about a journey into the extraordinary. In the climactic scene, everything becomes eerily quiet as our protagonist (played by Richard Dreyfuss) is left awestruck when the vast alien mothership is revealed. We see the curved exterior, festooned with lights and protrusions of unknown technology, as well as a small, upside-down R2-D2 clinging to the bottom.

Wait... what? Yup, there it is. If you blink, you'll miss it, but there's a small model of the lovable droid from Star Wars glued to the underside of the ship.

The person who built the model used for filming shots of the mothership was clearly a Star Wars fan. Perhaps it was Spielberg himself, in a nod to his colleague George Lucas.

This is an Easter egg – a hidden message, image, or figure that usually represents an in-joke, cultural reference, or personal connection. It's something that creators intentionally insert into their work, but it isn't the focus of the work itself. The best Easter eggs are clever or delightful in a manner that is special to both the people who put them there and those in-the-know users who find them, creating a bond between creators and fans.

The name is derived from the traditional hunt for painted eggs

at Easter. The nature of software development – particularly the creation of video games – has provided ample opportunity for software engineers and designers to include Easter eggs in their creations. Software is complex and games are a natural place to leave puzzles behind. Hiding away a little message is relatively easy to do and can often go unnoticed.

Classic Easter eggs include pictures of the development team locked away in the memory of the early Apple Macintosh, or the 3D text screensaver on many versions of Microsoft Windows, which would cycle through names of the world's volcanoes if you typed 'volcano' as the text to display. ➡



Google prides itself on being a playful company, and the engineering and design teams have a long history of inserting Easter eggs here and there. Perhaps you've tried to get directions from Google Maps for traveling between New York and Tokyo. Or maybe you were curious to see what happens when searching Google for 'do a barrel roll.' You may have wanted to know more about 'recursion.'

The very first Google Easter egg is believed to be 'the answer to life, the universe, and everything.' If you type that phrase into the search bar, Google will tell you it's '42' – a reference to Douglas Adams' *The Hitchhiker's Guide to the Galaxy*. Some Easter eggs are targeted at a specific locale. In the UK, if you search for 'jason isaacs' you'll be greeted with the message 'Hello to Jason Isaacs,' a reference to an in-joke popularized by BBC Radio Five Live's *Film Review*.

There isn't any single rule at Google governing the insertion of Easter eggs, but it's important that they don't negatively impact search. According to Google veteran Matt Cutts, "We were worried that Easter eggs would send the signal that we didn't take our 'duty toward search' seriously, so we've always been selective in using them."

Easter eggs can be a way for software engineers and designers to put a bit of their own personality into the product through humor and wit. They're a way of saying, 'I made this and I love it.' Their hidden nature means that those who discover them are likely to be people who spend a lot of time using the product.

This act of discovery is great for building an emotional connection between the people who create software products and the people who use them. Finding an Easter egg is a great experience – like finding buried treasure – and sharing that experience

can be fun, too. It's a little gift for true fans that goes a long way towards making people feel like they're part of the club.

Easter eggs are a way to strengthen brands and build customer loyalty, particularly for software applications. They show personality, they delight and they can turn everyday users into passionate fans. That said, Easter eggs can be overused. Successful Easter eggs are genuine. They're the product of a creative/inquiring mind, for people who'll appreciate the joke. Veer towards too many and they seem manufactured. Zero-in on them too easily and there's no opportunity to create that sense of secret knowledge. But a well-placed Easter egg can have a large and lasting positive impact.

And as the *Close Encounters* example shows, Easter eggs can show up anywhere. Even in articles about Easter eggs ©