

Multimedia encoding

Pixels and resolution

An digital image is broken up into tiny elements called **pixels**. (That word was actually coined as a contraction of “picture element.”) A pixel is perceived as a solid color, and neighboring pixels can be different colors.

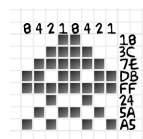
When we refer to the **resolution** of an image or a display device, we might be talking about two different things:

- The **number** of pixels in the image. For example, a typical low-resolution computer screen might be 1024×768. This is 786,432 pixels total, or about three-fourths of a megapixel. An high-definition (HD) video image is 1920×1080, or about 2 megapixels. Digital cameras can produce 5 or 10 megapixels or so, which means the image is larger than you can fit on most screens.
- Resolution can also refer to the **density** of the pixels in the display – usually referred to as **pixels per inch** (PPI) or dots per inch (DPI). Computer screens tend to be around 100 ppi, but some are larger. The Apple Retina brand displays are in the range 220–320 ppi. We can achieve much higher density using print on paper: a high-end laser print might be 1200 dpi or even higher. Projection screens are likely very low density, just because the same number of pixels are stretched over several feet. I’d estimate that our projection screen in class is under 20 ppi (about 1024 pixels spread across 5 feet).

Black and white

So how do we encode pixels as bits? The easiest case is when the image is completely black and white. That is, each pixel is either on or off. Then we can represent each pixel as exactly one bit.

On paper or a whiteboard, it’s sensible to let 0=off=white (the default background color) and 1=on=black (the color of your pen). So let’s draw an 8×8 pixel grid. We’ll fill in some pixels and leave others blank. This particular grid displays an alien from the early arcade game **Space Invaders**.



Since each pixel is exactly one bit, it’s trivial to represent this as a binary number. The top row is 00011000, followed immediately by the next row 00111100 and so on.

You'd have to know in advance that these bits represent an image that fits in an 8×8 grid. Otherwise, we could precede it by two bytes to specify the grid size.

Again, binary strings are long so it's nice to be able to abbreviate it using hexadecimal. This leads to a very natural encoding where you write 8, 2, 4, 1 over each group of 4 pixels, and then convert the results. You can see the hexadecimal encoding to the right of the image. In fact, Googling this hex string – [183C7EDBFF245AA5](#) – currently leads you to one page: my blog post on this topic!

You should practice encoding and decoding icons like this. Here's one example you can decode from the hex.

┌			└					3	8
								6	C
								6	8
								7	6
└							┌	D	C
								C	E
								7	B
└			┌				└	0	0

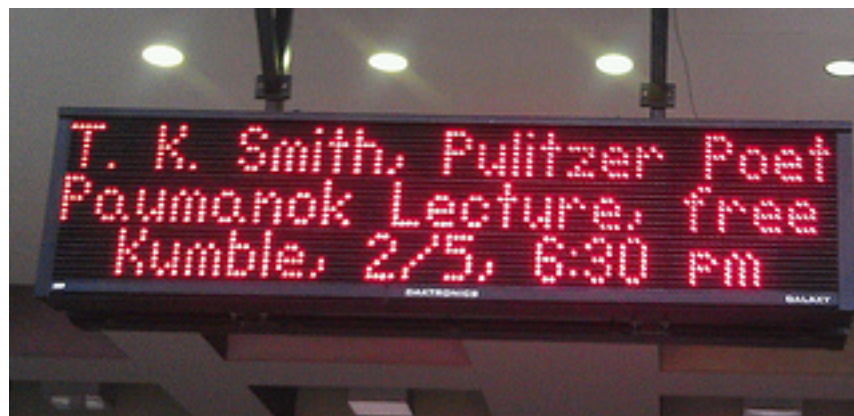
[My solution](#) is available; it's a character from an 8×8 bitmap font. To practice further, decode these additional characters from that font:

- 3C66703C0E663C00
- 7E607C0606663C00
- C6CCD8F0D8CCC600
- 00663CFF3C660000
- 0066ACD8366ACC00

You can also encode characters in hexadecimal based on [this font image](#) (zoom in with control-plus to see the 8×8 grids over each character).

You can also use the 1-bit per pixel encoding **with color** as long as each encoded image is one solid color. For example, in older versions of the Pac-Man game, the protagonist and each ghost are solid colors, even though the colors are all different. These shapes can still be encoded as 1 bit per pixel. (In class we'll use my [hexadecimal image workshop](#) that adds color to the 1-bit per pixel encoding technique in a different way.)

This is also an example of a 1-bit per pixel display:



Color images

How would we combine multiple colors into the same image? As a brief detour, let's explore what we mean by color.

What is color?

Color refers to the wavelength of light. We perceive short wavelengths as violet, and long wavelengths as red. In between are the usual spectrum of colors: orange, yellow, green, blue, etc. This range covers **visible light**, but there are also “colors” (other wavelengths) we can't perceive at all. Light with longer wavelengths than red is **infra-red**, and with shorter wavelengths than violet is **ultra-violet**.

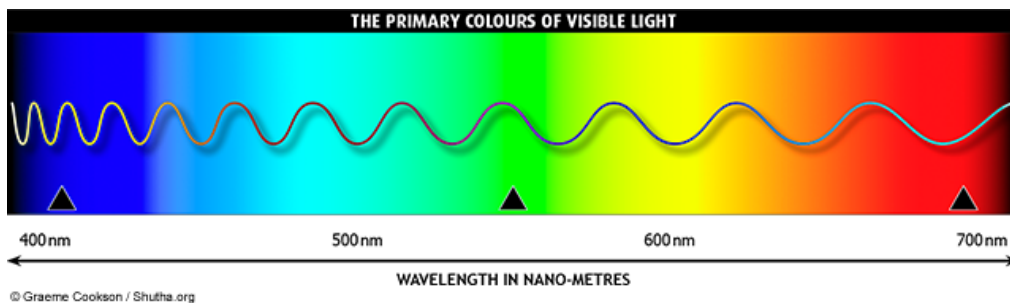


Figure 1: from [How We See Color](#)

Apart from the wavelength spectrum, the anatomy of our eyes leads to another way to explain color. Your retina contains light-sensitive cells known as **rods and cones**. The rods are largely color-blind, but are sensitive to small amounts of light so they help with night vision. The cones come in three flavors, sensitive to different wavelengths. The wavelengths that generate a response overlap, so the “in-between” colors are perceived as combinations of multiple cones.

When you painted in elementary school, you may have learned about the three **primary colors**: red, yellow, and blue. Red and yellow make orange, yellow and blue make green, etc.

With **subtractive color**, mixing paints results in dark and darker colors. Most computer displays, however, are based on **additive color**. In this model, we mix red, **green**, and blue lights to make different colors.

Subpixels

A pixel in most display technologies is actually a composition of three different lamps. They are so tightly packed that we usually cannot distinguish them independently, so they activate our cones as if they were producing a single wavelength. Below is a photo of two versions of the iPad display under a microscope (the iPad 3 on the left is Apple's Retina display).

On some large displays, you can see these “subpixels” with the naked eye, if you

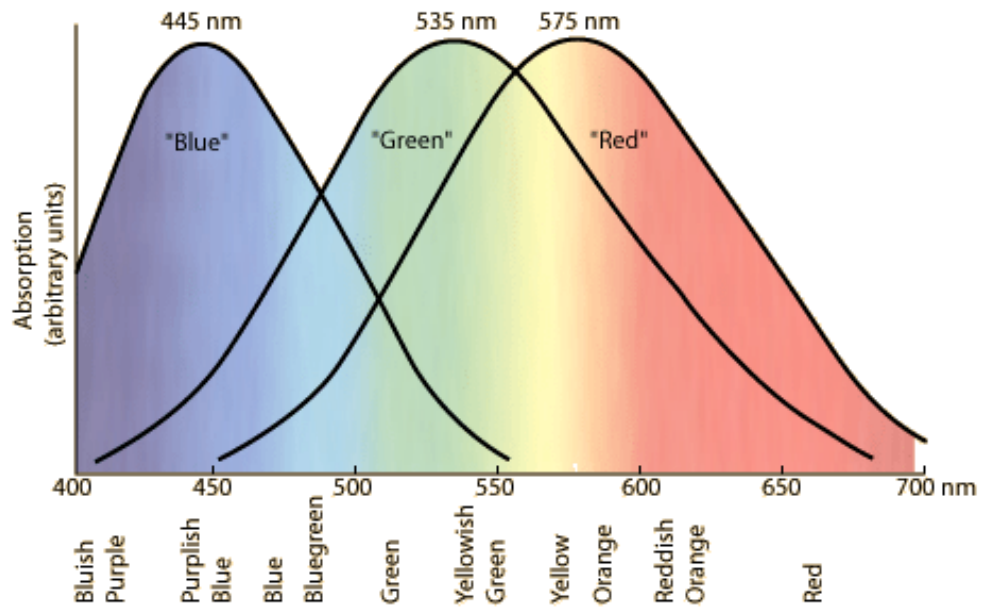


Figure 2: from [Color-Sensitive Cones](#)

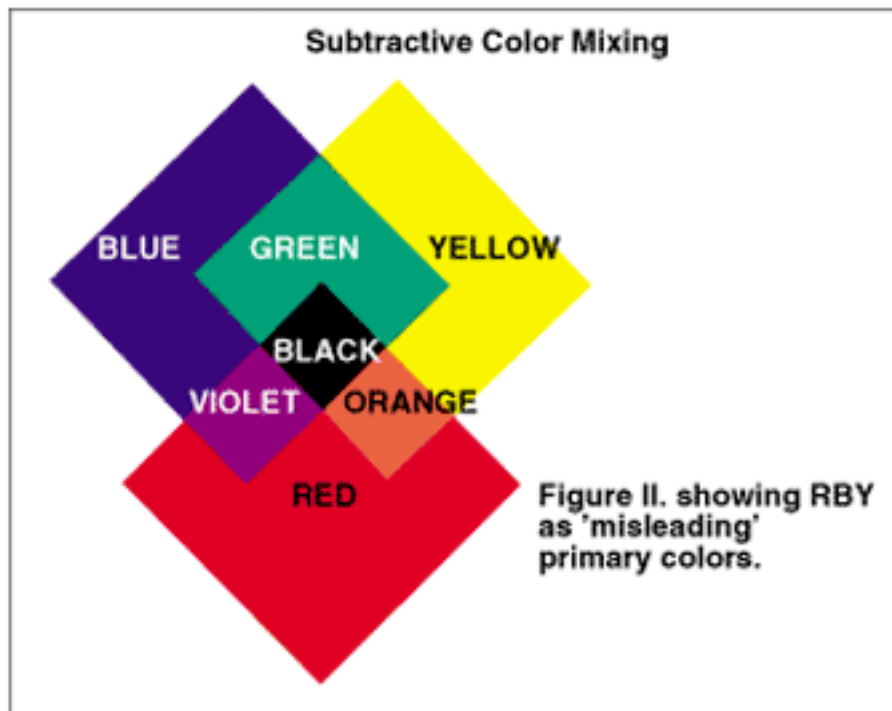


Figure 3: from [Color Theory](#) – click through to see why it's labeled 'misleading'

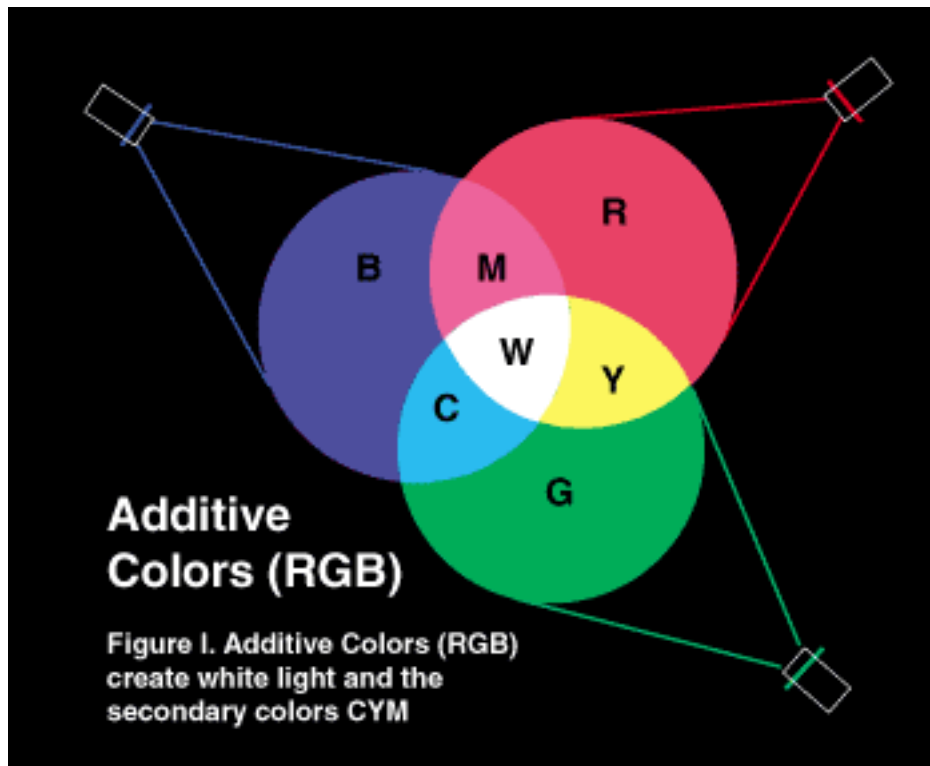
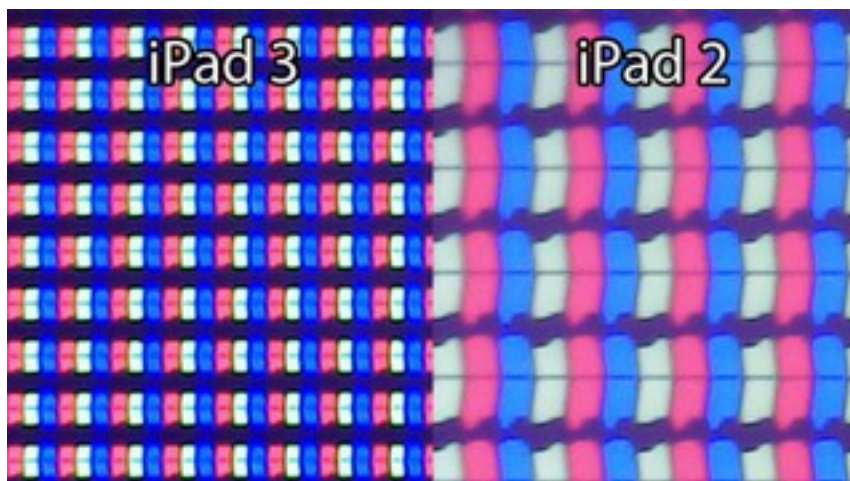


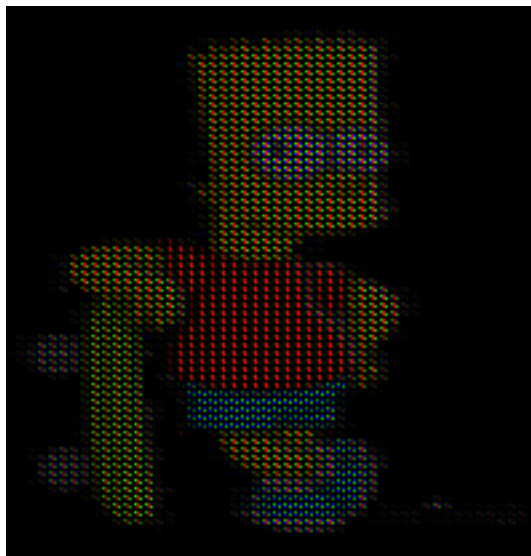
Figure 4: from [Color Theory](#) again



stand close enough. The following is a close-up of the display outside the Brooklyn Academy of Music on Flatbush Avenue. You can clearly see the pixels have six lamps: two red in the center, and the green and blue on opposite corners.



I wrote a [little program](#) to render images in a simulation of the subpixel layout of the BAM sign. If you right-click below and open Bart in a new tab, you can zoom in (control-plus). You'll see that what you perceive as yellow at a distance is actually just red and green; the whites of Bart's eyes are just red-green-blue.



Color encoding

Now, back to encoding color images as bits. Imagine using **3 bits per pixel**. (We call the number of bits used to represent the color of a single pixel the **color depth** of the image.) We would map each bit to one of the Red-Green-Blue primary lamps. That leads to these eight colors:

- 0 = 000 = black
- 1 = 001 = blue
- 2 = 010 = green
- 3 = 011 = cyan
- 4 = 100 = red
- 5 = 101 = magenta
- 6 = 110 = yellow
- 7 = 111 = white

Some systems extended this to **4-bit color**, using the 4th bit to indicate extra brightness of all the lamps at once. That produces 16 colors like the following. See also my [4-bit color demo](#).

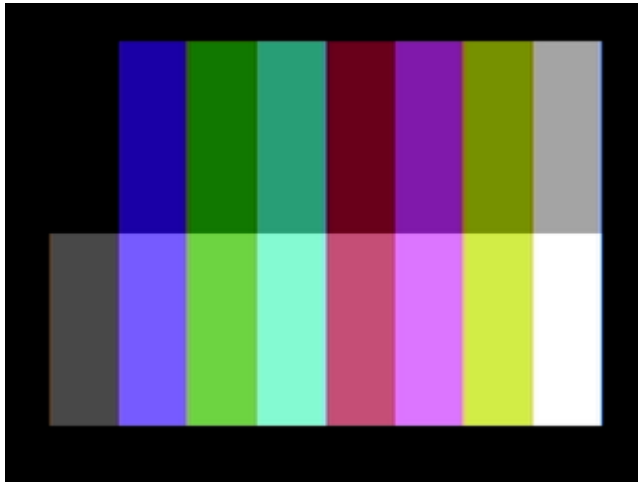


Figure 5: from Wikipedia on the IBM [Color Graphics Adapter](#) (1981)

Now let's expand to **6-bit color**. Since it's a multiple of 3, we can control the brightness of each lamp independently: 2 bits for red, 2 bits for green, 2 bits for blue. We'll interpret the two bits as:

- 0 = 00 = off
- 1 = 01 = low
- 2 = 10 = medium
- 3 = 11 = high

Then the color 110110 combines bright red, dark green, and medium blue. When all three lamps are the same brightness, we get shades of gray. so 000000 is black, 010101 is dark gray, 101010 is light gray, and 111111 is white. In total, there are $2^6 = 64$ possible colors with 6 bits.

We can apply the technique to any multiple of three: 9-bit color (512 possible colors), 12-bit color (4,096), and so on. Skipping these, our next stop will be **24-bit color**. It's also known as **true color**, since it is believed to be more colors (16 million!) than any human can perceive anyway. Using 8 bits (one byte) for each lamp, we get to dial the brightness from 0–255. Expressing these 8 bits as two hexadecimal digits, that range is 00–FF.

So true colors are six-digit hexadecimal numbers, like 6B1CC6. Let's decompose that into bits:

6	B	1	C	C	6
0 1 1 0	1 0 1 1	0 0 0 1	1 1 0 0	1 1 0 0	0 1 1 0
<-----Red----->		<-----Green----->		<-----Blue----->	

With this color, we have the red lamp at $6B_{16} = 107_{10}$ (out of 255, or 42%) brightness. The green lamp is $1C = 28$ out of 255, or 11% brightness. The blue lamp is $C6 = 198$ out of 255, or 78% brightness. Obviously, blue is the dominant color, with red next. Here is a sample of 6B1CC6:

You can play with hex true colors by adjusting sliders in my [24-bit color demo](#), and there's a color quiz called [What the Hex?](#)

Image formats

The representations we've explored so far – simply writing the bits representing pixel colors – is known informally as a **bitmap**. There's a BMP image format based on this, but it contains additional bits to specify the color depth, image size, and some other capabilities. The three formats we'll concentrate on are PNG, JPEG, and GIF.

PNG (Portable Network Graphics) is a compressed image format that supports 24-bit color. It's a great choice for comics, drawings, logos, and icons.

JPEG (Joint Photographic Experts Group) is also compressed, but it's designed especially for photographs. Unlike PNG, the compression in JPEG is **lossy** – it actually throws away some of the information in the original image, so it can achieve a smaller file size. In photographs the lossage is mostly not noticeable, although if you intend to crop and edit your photos it's best to compress only once, at the very end. Each time you edit and save a JPEG, more information is lost.

GIF (Graphic Interchange Format) is a relatively old format, but it remains popular in some applications mainly because it supports simple animation. The format can contain a sequence of images that are then displayed in quick succession, and usually looped. The pixel content is compressed using the lossless LZW algorithm.

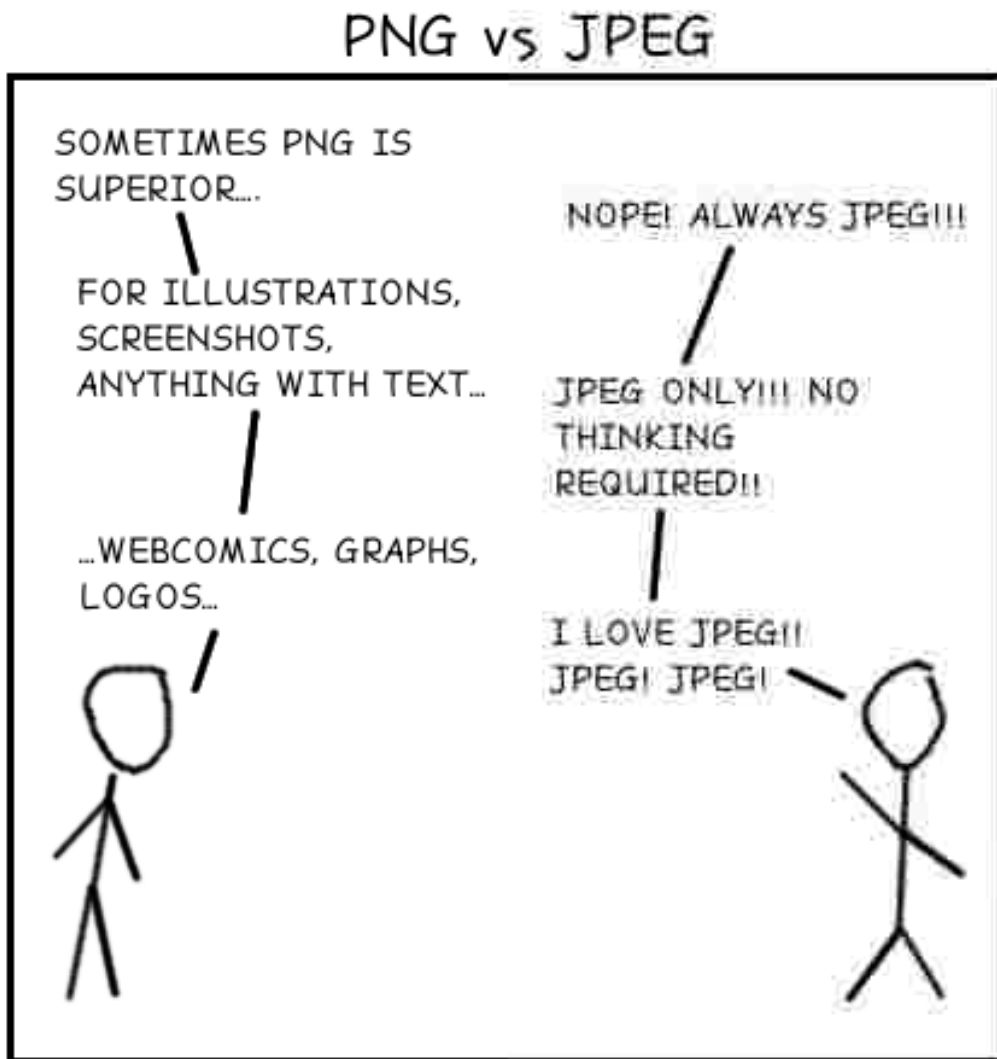
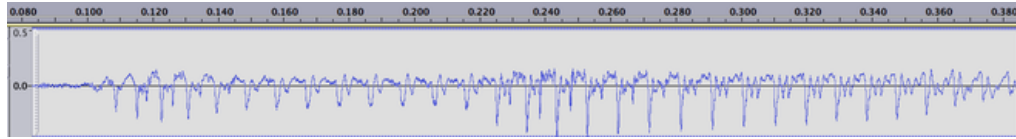


Figure 6: A (slightly exaggerated) look at using JPEG for line drawings, by [Louis Brandy](#)



16-bit 44.1 kHz • 8-bit 44.1 kHz

16-bit 20 kHz • 8-bit 20 kHz

16-bit 10 kHz • 8-bit 10 kHz

16-bit 5 kHz • 8-bit 5 kHz

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