FCJ-041 Sharing Styles: New Media, Creative Communities and the Evidence of an Open Source Design Movement

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Introduction: The Trouble with Flexibility

2 Design has become an essential part of the contemporary global economy. Graphic, industrial, and Web design, in particular, produce a seductive link from the 'economic to the cultural' facets of our lives (Julier, 2000: 20). More to the point, design creates desire – the fuel of contemporary commerce (Helfand, 1999; Lasn, 1999).

3 The ease of manufacture and "just-in-time" production scheduling mandate an ever-shrinking response time to market feedback. The result is a similarity between products and services (Julier, 2000: 25-27). It is therefore imperative that corporate entities sell an image of themselves in order to differentiate their products from a competitor's.

4 The role of the designer has become one of a cultural intermediary who maintains a 'specific attunement to the swirl of values and tastes within culture' (Soar, 2002: 571). As a result, the designer is obligated to create something that is not only highly innovative but is acceptable to broad audiences for integration into their everyday lives. The interconnectedness of commercial production and cultural identity is such that the careers of designers are subject to the whims of the marketplace, the corporate entity, and the intended audience's ever-shifting cultural norms and tastes.

5 Many designers struggle to navigate between the demands of commercially viable cultural production and personally meaningful work (McRobbie, 2002a). Perhaps buying into the mythology that aggrandizes the struggling artist, young designers often work long hours in insecure jobs for nothing more than a flexible schedule, mediocre pay, and a passion for their work.

6 It has been posited that this recent promotion of the "entrepreneurial spirit" and the individualisation of creative work is central in the neo-Liberal economic agenda (McRobbie, 2002a). Angela McRobbie's work on the post-Fordist culture industries in Great Britain highlights many salient features of New Labour's efforts to dismantle the social aspects of the work environment. Many of the trends she reveals are concomitant throughout the world.

7 The promise of creative freedom, design stardom, and self-expression drives designers to work in temporary or freelance jobs and to forgo financial security thus feeding capitalism an endless supply of young, fresh talent. The flexible economy and the designer ethos allow capital to offload much responsibility for maintaining and supporting the workforce (McRobbie, 2002b). The individualisation of the work experience for the freelance creative producer subverts the traditional social facets of the workplace and removes the threat of unionisation. Needless to say, as designers and artists grow older a freelance or corporate practice may prove too risky or otherwise undesirable. Options for the middle-aged creative professional may be limited.

8 This article argues that online environments supplement the design practice by providing some of the social networks that McRobbie argues are dismantled in the new work environment. McRobbie maintains that alternative environments, such as the club or bar, become the designer or artist's primary social realm blurring the line separating their work and private lives (McRobbie, 2002b). Technologies such as the mobile phone, laptop, and café with Internet access, she argues, work in similar fashion.

9 I contend that the role of technology is far more convoluted. I will describe the technological tools used by designers to expand their practice. This review is derived from an ethnographic study of design culture websites – websites that cater to all types of artists, designers, and design aficionados – and discussions with their participants.

10 Drawing on Richard Barbook's notion of a hi-tech gift economy (Barbook, 1998) and Andrew Feenberg's open source exchange model (Jesiek, 2003), I analyse communal production and alternative creative culture in the described online spaces within the context of the individualised and flexible contemporary design practice. Both Barbook and Feenberg see code sharing in open source projects as reinvigorating individual and communal agency and slightly shifting power away from the corporate entity. I borrow this notion of gift exchange and lay it over the conceptual

framework describing the online design community spaces in an effort to explain how the traditional design practice has expanded with the use of the Internet. What results, I argue, is a wide array of resources, intellectual property licenses, publishing venues, small-scale markets, and collaborative production methodologies that may benefit the small-scale or independent creative producer.

11 Design portals and blogs, for instance, often provide a number of resources for designers at all professional levels: professional services that support designers and artists, job postings, tutorials, free visual materials, and small-scale marketplaces in which participants can sell their work.

12 Through this analysis and a comparison with open source movements, I argue that we must appreciate the development of a parallel design practice. This parallel practice perhaps affords the designer more freedom, thus further blurring the lines between traditional art-making and the design disciplines. The work shared on design community sites is often self-motivated and distributed outside the commercial realm where designers and artists are freed from the restrictions imposed by capital. The communities that develop, then, thrive on sharing and reputation-based means of advancing discourse about the production of visual artifacts.

13 What I hope can be extrapolated from this notion of the parallel design practice is that there may be subtle shifts in the global cultural economy that, while not a sea change, may expand and, in time, alter the creative individual's cultural practices and, by default, their role in and relationships with the corporate world.

Design Culture Websites – A Virtual Ethnography

14 To best understand this parallel practice, one must first examine the role of online community in the working lives of designers. The ethnographic research that informs this article happened from March 2000 until July 2005 and was carried out in a number of ways:

- Email correspondence
- Instant messaging
- Review of bulletin board and blog postings
- Informal electronic survey taking
- Telephone interviews.

15 It is the blurring of the professional and private, work and play divisions that make it somewhat facile to study individual and communal interactions. The primary contacts became part of the study through casual conversation initiated by a prompt that was, more often than not, a question I posed to the individual by email. As the conversations continued, I tried to garner a sense of how the online community functions in their individual practice. I compared their responses with observed long- and short-term behavior and their discussions in online forums.

16 I spent significant time lurking in online spaces, observing community members, and interviewing individuals directly. In addition to visiting virtual community spaces (portals, message boards, and resources sites) daily, scrutinizing archived chat transcripts, and interviewing the primary contacts, I followed references, topics of discussion, or hypertext links.

17 Complicating matters, however, was the fact that design culture communities are a loose conglomeration of sub-cultural groups and various disciplines. The boundaries defining this study community were much less formally defined and very fluid. From one community space to the next, a variety of notions exist about how the online resources change or supplement traditional design practices. There was consensus, however, on the idea that online resources, information repositories (in the form of blog entries or portal links), community discussions, and portfolio sharing had indeed influenced their practice in some way and often for the better.

18 A generally positive view of online community and resources was shared across a study community of roughly 220 people. I maintained a core group of seven primary informants with whom I communicated periodically throughout the four years of this study. The bulk of the research, however, comes from the larger survey of designers and creative individuals. The key informants came from diverse backgrounds and had achieved various levels of recognition in their online design communities.

19 Of the primary informants, two individuals were students who had been lauded by community members and had work frequently displayed on well-known design portals. Two other individuals

helped establish and curate collective design culture sites and a third hosted live events and a successful website promoting experimental motion graphics.

20 The other primary contacts were practicing designers (one Web designer and one traditional print-based graphic designer) who, despite their frequent visits to design portals and participation in online discussions, did not really consider themselves an active part of the online design culture community. The primary contacts lived in Western Europe, the United States, Canada, and the Philippines. All seven participants were in their twenties.

21 When asked how they defined themselves, 57% of the broader study community simply considered themselves "designers". Another 38 defined their occupation in more specific terms:

Art Directors (4%)

Interactive Flash/Designers (1.39%)

Interaction Designers (5.8%)

Artists (2.9%)

Programmers (3.78%)

Specialists (2.9%)

Photographer (1.2%)

Visual Stylists (1%)

Illustrators (1.4%)

Creative Directors (4%)

Professor/Educators (1.33%)

22 Students (8.69%)

23 As my focus was initially on web design communities, many of the participants, in the initial years at least, had concentrated on web design as profession. It is interesting to note that in follow-up interviews in the summer of 2005 with five subjects from the broader survey, only two continued with careers in web design. The other three had taken on co-related professions (design educator, web master).[1]

24 For the most part, design culture communities mirror other technology-based production groups in the fact that they are made-up primarily of young, educated, white, middle and upper class males. I estimate that, in the United States, less than 25% of Web-based creative talents are non-white. I am using numbers provided by the Bureau of Labor Statistics and various design collectives and organizations (Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2000; Ryan Carson, 2003; Organization of Black Designers, 2003).

25 Obfuscating my numbers is the fact that these creative communities are international. Apart from designers in North America (including Canada and Mexico), there are large contingents of creative producers from Asia, Western Europe and Australia represented in this study. Any review of global virtual community must integrate international constituents.[2]

26 It is important to note that most of the designers interviewed remarked that, regardless of nationality, they had grown up familiar with a number of visual production tools and technologies, yet had varying technical expertise. Most considered design to be a form of artistic, personal expression. Art-related activities were described as hobbies by many in the community, highlighting a definite blurring of the line between their work and personal time. It is surprising then that design and technology ranked quite low as hobbies or influences (6% technology-related experimentation or development [computer building, etc.]) and 6% design-related activity (designing for personal reasons, visiting design museums, reading design journals). The lowest ranking influence or hobby was any type of virtual or non-virtual social interaction (3%).

27 These numbers, however, contradict other information obtained through the observation and interview portion of this study. For instance, design portals, are complex sites where work, play, private review, and public discourse happen all at once and many designers have described their visits to these sites either as personal or work-related investigation. I would like to posit that these communities' culture of production does not, whether good or bad, differentiate between the work and non-work social realm.

The Designer Portal and Blog

28 While it is easy to assume that Internet-based technologies such as email, chat, instant messaging, and the like expand the flexible economy in an intrusive way for the creative producer, design culture sites certainly fit a similar description, as they are at once a professional and personal social space and a resource library.

29 The portal borrows from both traditional media types (trade magazines, brochures, print portfolios) and earlier forms of computer-mediated communication such as Usenet discussions (Turner-Rahman, 2004). When visiting a portal, users can create accounts that allow access to job information or visual resources such as user-created stock photography, moderated discussions, and resource links.

30 Often a significant portion of the portal website is dedicated to hyperlinks to inspirational or otherwise interesting work or cultural artifacts. Blogs work in similar fashion but are more often than not text-based and focused on one author's or a small collective's commentary. Blogs also tend to be more chronological in nature whereas the portal may have blog-like elements but may be more dialogical, slowly evolving, and less dependent on daily updates.

31 Conceptually, blogs and portals seem to work on principles similar to peer-to-peer (p2p) file trading technologies. Simply put, p2p connectivity allows individuals to share files over a network. Software installed on the user's machine enables the display of downloadable files on other machines while presenting the user's files for downloading to other individuals. Each individual, then, becomes a node that either serves as an individual computer serving files – a server – or as a supplier of files to a central server.

32 The user becomes an active part of the network by offering up her files to the sharing community. It is interesting to note that in an initial set of interviews with experimental web designers that over sixty percent described using file sharing in order to download Photoshop and other software that, for many, was prohibitive in cost.[3]

33 The design portal membership and blog authorship encourage sharing resources and advancing the collective discourse on a host of interdisciplinary topics. The portal or blog is a central locus that fosters the construction of a living document or knowledge base for that community. Portals, in particular, also become a designed object that require a certain level of craftsmanship in order to attract visitors to the site and to show that the moderators are competent in the dialogue of design. The quality of the discussion and the linked resources similarly legitimatise the site.

34 Linked resources allow for the interconnection of not only the creative producers' professional representations, such as an individual's homepage, but also inspirational sites and resources. What results is a complex social network wherein knowledge is shared, discourse continued and advanced, and tentative social bonds are forged.

35 The practice of sharing visual and technical information lies at the heart of activity on the design portal or blog and it becomes a method of scrutinizing and assembling an understanding of the culture at large or the professional practice in particular. It also reveals that individuals are attempting to connect to one another and expand the communal knowledge base in a manner that can be considered a chaotic and recursive cycle of production and consumption.

Examples and Evolution

36 There are a large number of design-related portals and blogs. To further complicate matters there is often cross-linking. The entire network of design culture is, therefore, difficult to ascertain. The interconnectedness of the sites reemphasizes the key aspects of the community such as the open sharing of resources. But this sharing highlights the fact that each site varies slightly. Although there may be the same members visiting, each portal or blog has a unique feel due, in part, to a particular disciplinary emphasis, types of commentary or merely the make-up of the regular participants.

37 The elements most often shared by portals and blogs are: news items, collective resources, links to inspirational work, threaded discussions, and showcases of well-regarded work.

38 Newstoday [https://www.newstoday.com] has all of the aforementioned elements and is a design culture portal. It caters primarily to the web designer while also hosting a number of resources for fashion designers, architects, motion graphics designers, print-based graphic designers, interior

designers, and design aficionados. The site design is divided into several panes: site moderators' hyperlink resources, public hyperlink resources, public discussion forums, and job postings.

39 Newstoday's resources are, more often than not, links to sites that the author or contributor feels are inspirational. Sometimes these resource links feature code that others can borrow and alter to fit their own needs. Others provide personal stock photography, found visual artifacts, custom-designed fonts, and images of quirky, unique or otherwise remarkable (or, in some instances, terribly mundane but humorous) graphical works.

40 Discussion forums also are broad and centre on virtually any topic including those not specifically related to art and design. These discussions often feature brief commentary supported by links to yet more external Web-based resources. The plethora of topics highlights not only the mélange of the social and the professional but also the international audience. Newstoday is very much a designed object that shows a certain level of design skill and technical expertise. The portal's visual appearance further identifies its producers as engaged in the broader technical and visual discourse. Thus, it is a popular design culture destination. Similarly, By Designers for Designers (BD4D) [https://www.bd4d.com] hosts a large international audience, yet the site is pared down with only a few select works presented for viewing and a list of hyperlinks offered up by the members of the collective. This community of designers and artists shares an interest specifically in motion graphics as well as animation, linear or three-dimensional graphic design, and filmmaking. The site extends the social aspects of the website through small events or showings in physical venues literally throughout the world. Artists of all kinds come together to share their work and interact in a very relaxed, almost party-like atmosphere. The BD4D website, like the live events, is designed to bring the global collective together and to showcase emerging talent.

41 What is remarkable, explains Ryan Carson, one of BD4D's founders, is that the events are organized and paid for by the collective's members (Carson, 2003). Motivated by passion, community members finance and spend vast amounts of time and energy on their own projects. Few make any money on completed work, in fact, and it is an unwritten rule that it is forbidden to show commercial work during the group's show times. However, the use of BD4D projects in a commercial portfolio is common and not discouraged.

42 BD4D designers often spend copious amounts of time crafting intricate imagery using 3D modeling and rendering applications and personal photography and video. The use of commercial imagery or stock photography is, for the most part, frowned upon. Beyond the notion that stock imagery is unoriginal, good stock photography is often expensive and brings about issues pertaining to copyright and fair use.

43 Stock Exchange [https://www.sxc.hu] is a site that solves this copyright dilemma by allowing amateur and professional photographers to share their work. The website's database serves as remedy for designers looking for free images or visual resources that are not protected by complex intellectual property rights and regulations. Site participants can upload and download high-resolution images and there is generally an understanding that the image can be used in any context as long as the work is attributed to the photographer. When creating a Stock Exchange account, participants must agree to a contract that states the work uploaded is original and can be used by other members. Images downloaded from Stock Exchange can be used, free of charge, even in a commercial application as long as the photographer is cited on the final product.

44 Stock Exchange is not the only site offering alternative licensing of intellectual property or free resources. More recently Creative Commons [https://www.creativecommons.org] and Ourmedia.org [https://www.ourmedia.org] have developed in response to stringent intellectual property laws. The Creative Commons website states that the organization seeks to preserve the public domain in an era of tightening intellectual property protections through the development of alternative downloadable licenses, legal codes, and deeds of varying copyright protection.[4]

45 As more general, and perhaps more evolved, creative online communities, there is a whole host of media, ample discussion, and shared information about projects, resources, and alternative forms of copyrighting creative work. Creative Commons, Ourmedia.org and Australian Creative Resources Online (ARCO) [https://www.uq.edu.au/acro/information.html] act as interface to or, in some instances, storehouse for work stored on the Internet Archive [https://www.archive.org] and other free-content sites. The Internet Archive began as a digital library of current and now-defunct websites but now houses other cultural artifacts such as textual works, video, still photography,

and music. Media producers using similar repositories such as Flickr.com [https://www.flickr.com], a site where users share images and illustrations, can define how others can use their work by applying more nuanced copyrights outlined on the Creative Commons site. As a result, licenses from Creative Commons, when applied to media shared by community members, provide open access to intellectual property and allow for more open media resource archives and free culture gathering spaces. Furthermore, the content distribution sites additionally provide a common publishing space for a wide range of design culture producers – not just visual artists and designers.

The Communal Product

46 The merger of so many visual resources in the more design-specific portals such as Newstoday bring to light the vast range of influences and inspiration for professional and amateur creative producers alike. It also reinforces notions of de-specialization and of entrepreneurial individuation within the broader commercial model. The designer can choose any media or stylistic approach for a particular project and then publish with varying copyright protections. The market often requires novel visual forms, and encourages technology-enabled cross-disciplinary or interdisciplinary exploration. The portal, blog, resource repository, and alternative intellectual property protection allow for open exchange.

47 It is possible that, as McRobbie warns, the technological apparatus also encourages an acceleration of commercial cooptation of creative freedoms and the promotion of an exclusive body of producers – a notion somewhat supported by the demographics of many design portal users. The community, like other technology and design related groups, is predominantly composed of white, middle or upper class males from primarily Western countries, although the demographics are quickly changing (Turner-Rahman, 2004).

48 Regardless, the technologies fostering shared resources and open visual and verbal discourse inexorably alter the practice of design by allowing for spontaneous alterations to methods of practice. Although cutting-edge productions can be quickly repackaged for commercial products, the expansion of practice through technological channels provides alternative venues for publication and interpersonal communication on a global scale.

49 In theory, a wider range of producers can enter the discourse. In many instances, however, the work produced by the varying design communities remains within the confines of the community site and never reaches the commercial realm unless promoted in an individual's portfolio. Within the portal or blog, it seems the more open and extreme products rely on anarcho-communism in an open source method of production as the underlying ideology.

50 Often design efforts from a host of different disciplines are shared on the portal sites and absorbed by other community members passively or through active experimentation. Some dialogue about an artwork or design and how it was accomplished or simply how novel it may be is spread through whatever communications channels are available – personal conversation, email, instant messaging, online discussions, even live events in physical venues. Yet the filtering and elevation of interesting, beautiful, or otherwise remarkable work happens when certain projects and discussions are shared between portal and blog sites. What results is an open source-like method of communal knowledge-sharing and meaning-making.

51 Open source is a term that has come to mean the distribution of computer code for individual development of a particular project such as computer applications or operating systems. The development of Linux, as an example, happens under the GNU/General Public Licensing of the Free Software Foundation which allows developers to download the code, experiment by altering that code, and report back to a central website bulletin board to share their findings and revisions. [5]

52 Over time, online discussions on open source project sites reveal who the key developers are with sophisticated understandings of the code. The more reputable developers become – in the lingua franca – mavens who help facilitate further development of the project by moderating discussions, reviewing code, promoting changes in the code, and by mentoring other potential mavens. The reputation of the mavens is indicative of their contribution to an open source project. The fact that many do demanding work for very little pay reveals that the system works as a sort of gift economy.

53

Richard Barbrook, in the article “The Hi-Tech Gift Economy,” explains, through the example of the open source development of Linux, how anarcho-communism as a functional model in cyberspace competes with money-commodity systems (Barbrook, 1998). Arguing that cyberspace establishes a complex, symbiotic relationship between progressive ideologies and commercial structures, Barbrook traces the lineage of Linux and other projects and technologies unique to the Internet back to the radical political movements of the 1960s.

54 Barbrook goes on to describe how Internet discussion tools, file sharing, and email enable an economy based on the circulation of gifts that help establish personal bonds and a reputation for the gift-giver (1998). By extension one could likewise argue that Internet-based community spaces allow for an expansion of the gift economy that extends beyond the intellectual elite, thus bypassing what Barbrook calls the “bourgeois alienation” that has plagued other progressive movements such as the Situationists (1998). In the model outlined by Barbrook one advantage is that:

55 > Despite the commercialisation of cyberspace, the self-interest of Net users ensures that the hi-tech gift economy continues to flourish (1998).

56 Open source movements and the computer network-mediated gift economy work without the regulations imposed by markets or states and are formed ‘through the mutual obligations created by gifts of time and ideas’ (1998). Traditional commercial models work in an environment based on scarcity whereas the networked, anarcho-communist model is one of abundance, where digital files can easily be copied, shared, and altered. To impose secrecy in a system of abundance actually puts an organization at risk of being outside of the community of development and their advances in a specific body of knowledge. Barbrook explains that in order for corporate interests to remain competitive they must, in essence, fund anarcho-communism (1998). The janus-like nature of the flexible economy is apparent in the working practice and private creative exploration shared on portal sites and, as a result, open source takes on different qualities in online design communities. It appears as “competition”, as moderated commentary or feedback, as the ranking of work or as work shared throughout a number of community sites.

57 There are different versions of the competitive model of open source design projects. For instance, a popular iteration is “Photoshop Tennis” where one designer takes an image, alters it to create a uniquely individual graphical production, and then passes the image along to another designer to alter that image. In another iteration, competitors take the same image and produce independent designs. This is a modern incarnation of the exquisite corpse, a method used by Surrealists to develop an image or text by allowing each contributor to only see a portion of the entire work.

58 Following the Surrealist methodology in spirit perhaps, this competition often has no true winner but is instead a method of revealing different methodologies, each individual’s unique approach to visual styling and the resulting concoctions. In some instances, the visual object is passed back and forth and the image is inscribed with multiple layers of visual decoration. These projects go hand in hand with other collaborative projects, such as themed websites. They provide a method of sharing personal aesthetics and are an effective way of fostering social interaction and producing communally shared symbols and experiences. These visual experimentations may work their way into personal productions that are in turn shared with the community thus generating a type of visual discourse. On some sites the discussion about visual work becomes a method of mentoring and developing the novices’ skills.

59 Conceptart.org [https://www.conceptart.org], a community site centered on discussions about concept art and production design for film and video games, has a substantial portion of its discussion space dedicated to the informal critiques of members’ artwork. The depth and quality of the discussions and critiques vary. The breadth of mentors – some who are currently working in the industry – often provides the younger and more inexperienced artists not only with encouragement and critical assessment of their work but also with ample inspirational imagery.

60 Beyond the work itself are, again, the structures of community that foster an exchange of knowledge and visual productions. One key element is the discussion fora that reaffirm the fact that design culture sites do not exist solely as entities for their creators’ own pleasure but are a fora into which community members can engage in the various verbal and visual discussions. This discussion about exploratory visual work or commercial projects, as facilitated by the technology is troubling to some critics. As Peter Lunenfeld explains:

61 In the Capital's seminal essay on the fetishism of commodities, Marx discusses the distortion of social relations brought about by the tendency under capitalism to emphasize the "exchange value" of the commodity over its "use value." Commodity production impels the development of social relationships among producers. But for Marx, this relationship becomes obscured with the fetishism of commodities – wherein the relationship between producers is taken metonymically as the relationship between commodities. (Lunenfeld, 2001: 5)

62 Lunenfeld's critique could be leveled at Internet-based exchange where the commerce of goods is now supplanted by the commerce of tools (Lunenfeld, 2001). Lunenfeld, from a more traditional Marxist vantage point, sees a point when the production of technology spurs continued growth of industries and technological apparatuses (hardware and software) that are designed to give the impression that they will inexorably alter our lives for the better.

63 Design culture at times certainly celebrates a similar techno-fetishistic and deterministic position: good design will enhance life. Design culture sites often link to commercial work or information about new technologies, for that matter, as a way of advancing the practice by keeping community members aware of the next new thing. Often new products and technologies not only benefit the production of design work but also are packaged in a manner that is of interest to the visual designer. There is an inexorable bond, then, between the technology and the design communities and it could be argued that both thrive on the same sort of techno-fetishism. Again, the commerce of products is now, more than ever, supported heavily by the design industries. Techno-fetishism aside, it is apparent that within the design culture portals and blogs, and the software tools used by visual designers, the artist or designer is capable of both consumption and production of cultural artifacts. Furthermore, in the case of web design in particular, the technology facilitates the production of the community apparatuses as well.

64 One could argue that, in the quest for new aesthetics and novel approaches to design, the study community increasingly sought and promoted whatever novel inspirational form it could find. While these sources of inspiration are quickly co-opted for commercial purposes, the communal sites showcased a never-ending supply of talent and facilitated an international discourse about practices and alternative models of production and distribution.

65 Design culture communities, I would argue, sustain exchange-relationships that closely resemble Barbrook's description of a hi-tech gift-economy. This electronic gift economy consists of individuals sharing information 'without the expectation of any direct, immediate quid pro quo' (Kollock, 1999: 220). Peter Kollock distinguishes gifts in the following way: '...gifts are exchanged between individuals who are part of an ongoing interdependent relationship' (Kollock, 1999: 221).

66 Open source communities host an exchange model similar to that maintained in the academy where one's research is publicly disseminated to support and extend not only the discipline-specific knowledge-base but the researcher's own reputation as well. Brent Jesiek, in Democratizing Software: Open Source, the Hacker Ethic, and Beyond, is able to look past corporate mythologies about Internet subcultures in his search for truly democratic technologies and communal structures. Using the work of Andrew Feenberg, Jesiek argues that social values can be embedded in the functions of a technological product. Feenberg contends, as Jesiek tells us, that the open source model squarely places power in the hands of a multitude of producers. Thus the opportunities to challenge traditionally hegemonic structures and ideologies are expanded greatly (2003). The agency allowed by open source community may foster an alternative production model that normalizes the 'embedding of more positive social and democratic ideals into technologies' (2003).

67 In the same vein, the inspirational links more often than not make up the most significant part of the portals, allowing designers to post their own work or resources they deem important. Hyperlinks are therefore the fundamental structure of sharing. Design community sites, then, subtly foster a more democratizing model of community by providing a means of publishing and broadcasting. When established designers seek out – whether through casual solicitation among friends or by personal investigation – and present what they deem notable work, they are, in essence, elevating the efforts and reputation of both novice and established designers and expanding the communal discourse. This type of sharing is not unique in Internet sub-cultures. Computer-mediated social networking has been significantly developed in the short span of Internet history. Regardless, the fact that the designers produce work that they share amongst

themselves is not unique either. Design culture community draws on many of other cultural influences by sharing interesting links and resources pertaining to a vast range of visual products designed or not.

68 Design culture sites can cover a range of issues and are rich with a plethora of visual and conceptual assets. It is important to note that the design community also intersects the professional realm. Often those who share their work make some sort of living in a creative profession yet the work shared on portal sites is a complex construction that is at once designed to promote oneself to commercial interests, and to other artists and designers. These projects can be sold to provide additional support for the designer. For instance, some creative producers create their own DVDs, t-shirts, books, or artwork and sell them on micro-scale ecommerce sites. Producers pay a small fee to the commerce site host and if an item is sold they retain the profit. Making money, however, is not often the priority. Reputation, a desire to share, and knowledge building often trump moneymaking efforts. There is also a wide range of projects that can be classified as experimentation and are marketed as valuable commodities to more than the corporate organization. An experimental design project may, by necessity, be more robust in its purpose and intent than the traditional design work as it is so intricately bound to both the reputation of the designer and the community's shared experiences and body of knowledge.

69 Andrew Darley highlights a remarkable aspect of the design community's sharing when he tells us that new media's spectacular images are often designed, developed, and delivered for private consumption (2000). Private, in this instance, means that the percipient is alone while viewing a work that was most likely created privately by an individual as well. Unlike the cinema and even video games – which both have also become modes of media presentation for private consumption yet rely on large communities working in a more or less traditional hierarchy – the experience of producing experimental design work could be likened to the reading, writing, and publishing of poetry. Alternatively, one web designer interviewed remarked that it is like a visual jazz improvisation happening on a global scale (Luz, 2002).

Conclusion

70 Adrian Shaughnessy, in an article entitled 'From Here to Here', argued that the discipline of graphic design was dividing into two 'distinct strands' – one a traditional business-oriented role and the other a design culture-type movement (Shaughnessy, 2004). Many design culture portals and blogs cater to both of Shaughnessy's strands of design. While I argue that the technology facilitates social networking, reputation-based methods of advancing knowledge, communal meaning making, and sharing of resources, there is still a fascination and ardent support for corporate design work. However, it seems that a significant number of innovative, independent projects are being published, shared, and celebrated on design culture sites. Thus it seems the power to decide what constitutes a work that advances the practice may be shifting away from corporate entities and developing indigenously within the creative communities themselves. Already we can see that the growth of more general media exchange sites such as Ourmedia.org and Stock Exchange as viable alternatives to a centralized, corporate-controlled marketplace and resources provided under alternative licensing options such as those outlined on Creative Commons. Furthermore, these sites promote the development of alternative modes of practice for the designer. These are based not on the traditional model of capital but on one that is more dialogic, reputation-based, and exploratory. It is possible to foresee a time when the design culture system incorporates more small-scale (even open source) e-commerce sites that allow the designer or artist to be self-sustained in their practice.

71 Regardless, the communal systems maintained by the online design culture websites and supporting technology represent an emanicipatory use of media. Following Enzenberger's constituents of a theory of media, open source design culture sites decentralise power, foster collective production, encourage active participation, and the mobilization of the masses (1996). This, perhaps, begins the project of repairing the holes in the social network fabric that were ripped apart by the alienation inherent in the work practices of the flexible economy.

Author's Biography

Gregory Turner-Rahman is an assistant professor of visual communication design in the department of Art and Design at the University of Idaho. He has spent much of his adult life

studying design communities from within as his professional experience spans the disciplines of graphic design, Web development, industrial design, and architecture. He is currently writing a book about online creative communities and open source design cultures.

Notes

[1] Many designers and aficionados within the study community hailed from a university or college (86%) while a small percentage of others were self-trained (4% self trained, 5% other, 4% high school or equivalent). Of note is that of those university students who practiced web design, for instance, only 31% had formal training whereas 63% described themselves as having learned their craft through books, experimentation, observing other work, and by following online discussions. Survey respondents working in other design areas (industrial design, graphic design, architecture) were less likely to consider themselves self-taught but did remark that the Internet is important or very important for continual career development.

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[2] The communities studied were predominantly male (94% male, 5% female) and were also made up of large numbers of younger individuals (86% 19-30 yrs. old, 14% 15-18 yrs. old, 10% 30-40 yrs. old, 1.5% 40+ yrs. old). Among all survey participants, music and movies rated highly as influences on their work (24% listening or playing music, 21% watching movies or videos). Other influences include outdoor activities (14% outdoor activities [bicycle riding, jogging, hiking, kayaking, rock-climbing, etc.]) and fine art (17% fine art activities [drawing, painting, sculpture, museum or gallery visits]).

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[3] The designers interviewed were describing how they began to do web design, and many described doing some form of computer-based artwork from the average age of 8. Although many were exposed to digital imaging software in schools or on a parent's machine, others remarked that P2P file sharing was the only way to garner access to expensive tools such as Photoshop or 3D rendering and modeling software.

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[4] Individuals can essentially piece together a license with varying levels of copyright protection. For instance, an artist may specify that a work can be copied, displayed, and distributed for non-commercial purposes only. Or, in another instance, the artist may not allow derivations of the work to be re-sampled or distributed.

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[5] The GNU project – GNU is a recursive acronym for GNU's Not Unix – was founded in 1984 by Richard Stallman, a former Artificial Intelligence researcher at MIT. Although the Free Software Foundation, also founded by Stallman, holds copyrights for much of the software released under GNU licenses, the non-profit organization provides the software and promotes an individual's right to freely copy, alter, and redistribute versions (Lessig, 2004; Stallman, 2005). Sourceforge [https://www.sourceforge.net] hosts nearly 105,000 open source software applications and projects released under GNU licenses (Sourceforge, 2005).

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