

Essay: Five behaviors of participatory culture and what they mean for design

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In the 1980's the advent of the personal computer gave rise to desktop publishing. Suddenly many had access to the tools of media creation and distribution. Some decried the death of standards and professionalism, but as we now know, that didn't happen. The new technology adopted by designers initiated a heightened sense of creative freedom, authorship and advancement within the profession.

Two decades and a dot com crash later creative control shifts again from a few with technical expertise to anyone with the means and desire. This led to an exponential growth towards the greater democratization of media creation. Again, some fret crude outcomes, but others remain optimistic that the rise of participation will push the design profession to new heights.

In 2005, new media publisher Tim O'Reilly coined the term "Web 2.0" and defined what has become an altered state-of-mind for how we work and play online. In this phase, publishing becomes participation, documents become dialogs, stickiness becomes syndication and hierarchical directories become chaotic clouds of subjective contexts. (O'Reilly)

Enter the era of participatory culture. This sea change is moving us away from traditional means of media intake and creation as well as mutating the very premise of consumption. In this upload and download society, producers and consumers of content hybridize into a single entity, or what techno-critic Kevin Kelly aptly coins the "prosumer."

As a result of almost ubiquitous broadband access, easy-to-use co-creation tools and key open source technologies, user-centered control is no longer a monologue. Rather, it is a symbiotic back-and-forth of permalinks and tags, comments and trackbacks, RSS and mash-ups. All adding up to one massive, collective dialog.

Participatory culture, while not exclusive to digital spaces, is certainly made more powerful through the technologies that enable specific user behaviors. These behaviors — linking, publishing, tagging, collaboration and customization — are lifelines to vast social networks and an expanding online knowledge base. Countless browser-based applications integral to participatory culture (e.g. Blogger, Flickr, Del.icio.us, Facebook, YouTube and Wikipedia) substantiate these actions. These social networks and many others plot to various points on the sharing continuum, allowing users of all types — from active leaders to passive players — to be a part of the conversation.

Publishing

The contributors to Wikipedia have collectively agreed to define participatory culture as “the production or creation of some type of published media.” And while the authority of such sources can be debated, their synergistic opinions can't be ignored. Traditionally, people have always sought forums to document thoughts and archive their lives. Only now, rather than locked in diaries or published in biographies, our lives can be streamed through dynamic media for instant public impact. Additionally, the ability to edit, reuse and remix existing content begets wholly new personal narratives and global dialogs.

Other modes of publishing are happening in more subtle ways, allowing users to track and document daily minutia, without even realizing their contribution to the nascent database. The premise of producing analog content that can translate to online display has now shifted to creating content solely to live online.

Whether users are tracking music listening habits on Last.fm, micro-blogging on Twitter or recording business relationships on LinkedIn, a vibrant form of life publishing is taking place.

Linking

Hypertext — the foundation to Tim Berners-Lee's world wide web — renders the most rudimentary form of online publishing nearly invisible. Every click increases a page's rank for search engines. Enough clicks and it rises to the forefront of public exchange. The web offers an "architecture of participation that encourages users to add value to the application as they use it," regardless of conscious input. (wikipedia)

With the over-abundance of content online, users must find in-roads to personal relevance and expression. Threads take on new life as they interlace and compound into other posts. In the end, you can "build your own narrative around text you found elsewhere" with blog posts and social bookmarks. (Vinh) Since bloggers tend to be self-referential, the simple power of online publishing has a ripple effect on the discourse, one that resonates inward as much as out.

Tagging

At its core, tagging is an idiosyncratic classification and search system based upon user-generated keywords and it eliminates the need for files to reside in single locations. When aggregated, tags harness a community's will to organize and give meaning to the content of the web. The words are visualized in a "tag cloud" of fluctuating typographic hierarchy and the most resonating of which enlarge to become symbols of established entry points, and have the potential to fulfill a future user's search criteria. As this "folksonomy" (a collaborative categorization system that is determined by online users) evolves from online interfaces to operating systems — or as the contents of our hard drives migrate online — how we interact with data may render the traditional hierarchy a fossil.

Collaboration

A behavioral offshoot of both publishing and tagging, is the web's ability to harness the power of collective intelligence in ways previously unseen. The earliest and still relevant example is Amazon.com's user reviews. Amazon chose a self-sustaining model based upon customer participation that is now a hardy industry standard and has spawned similar rating systems and bottom-up viral promotion strategies all over the web. One Web 2.0 manifestation is Digg.com which allows users to rate stories and those that receive the most "digs" rise to the top of the homepage.

Wikis are another example of the collective's ability to write, modify and police their own information. An idea that was scoffed at, now has a legitimacy that cannot be denied as the output and approval of wikis, user-review systems and blogs are embraced by an expansive online community and often seeps into mainstream media.

Customization

What has become obvious through all of this, is that people want the power to dictate their own image and voice. Whether it's through the obsessive, visual mayhem found on MySpace, or the power to define one's own information architecture on Facebook, the opportunity to create, remix and mutate data is inherent to participatory culture.

Customization is a manifestation of the technology that powers it. When intuitive interfaces have operational "skill[s] embedded," the learning curve is at its most minimal and thus accommodates the widest gradient from the tech savvy to the casual novice. (Postrel) Browser-based applications now come standard in WYSIWYG formats that activate the creative power of users. Ajax's scripting capabilities and the proliferation of CSS standards to separate content from presentation empowers participatory culture in a fully customizable world. Computer Science professor Gerhard Fischer's request that design be accessible to all interested people and not just "to a small group of high-tech scribes" is realized.

What does this customizable-tagged-published-linked-collaboration (aka participatory culture) mean for professionals of media creation and design?

It is clear we are no longer playing by the same rules, and although design jurisdiction appears to be slipping away, the interactive director of the NYTimes.com contends that "what we're interpreting as a loss of control is really a multiplicity of states." (Vinh) This requires more design, not less.

Technologies continue to offer designers the ability to finesse screen-based content with higher fidelity, and at the same time, these tools have transferred to the hands of the end-user. With access to simple, smart frameworks people willingly become co-creators (and are getting good at it too). A decade ago design researcher Liz Sanders correctly predicted that “when given the means to express themselves, [people] can be both articulate and creative” and she called for designers to reach beyond information visualization to meet those desires.

Because of the paradigm shift towards participatory culture, designers must evolve from creators of products or sole shapers of content into experts of functionality, flexible frameworks and systems that encourage participatory behaviors and expand over time. Facebook user's crave an application that offers them total content control and the ability to impact content arrangement while the brand's heralded aesthetic keeps the chaos at bay and allows members to focus on what they have to say. Mastery of form and meaning will not cease, but the new prerequisites for Web 2.0 (and 3.0) include designing scalable interfaces for customization, malleability, viral distribution and unpredictability.

The good news for designers is this appeal is an opportunity to quench the user's desire for guidance and clarity by providing people with a means of creation in order to seamlessly dialog and participate in online culture. Now, that's a juicy design problem!

This essay was written on a MacBook Pro with Google Doc's browser-based editing program.

All citations come from online resources including Wikipedia, Tim O'reilly's What Is Web 2.0 on oreilly.com, Virginia Postrel's Your Design Here on printmag.com and Khoi Vinh's AIGA presentation Control on designconference2007.aiga.org.

Additional resources: Kevin Kelly's New Rules for the New Economy on kk.org, Gerhard Fischer's Beyond "Couch Potatoes" on firstmonday.org, Liz Sander's Postdesign and Participatory Culture on maketools.com, Matt Veilla's Facebook's Big Facelift on businessweek.com and Ric Grefe's 2015: A Design Odyssey on designtaxi.com.