

The Parallel Practice: Open Source Flexibility and The Lure of the Virtual

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Abstract

This paper primarily concerns the practices of designers and artists within Internet-based communities. I argue here that open source methodologies centered on sharing, gift giving, and reputation building have some unique benefits and potential pitfalls for creative individuals. The production of small-scale markets intended for others within a creative community, for instance, provides artists and designers the conditions for a parallel practice but one that may not yet be as lucrative as the traditional practice. The parallel practice may also not allow for progressive social projects that assist the individual designer. I conclude by reviewing the increase of design work and storytelling production intended solely for virtual environments and ponder the affects on the individual creative practice.

Introduction

The role of designers and artists in recent years has seemingly been one of tastemaker or cultural intermediary (Soar, 2002). Through the production of physical or virtual artifacts, cultural intermediaries define the variables that, in turn, constitute the social arena in which all members of a general populace interact (Bourdieu, 1986). Within a market driven society, the creative individual is obligated to create highly innovative products with broad cultural appeal. In the case of the artist, the products may be visionary exploration and personal expression whereas the designer often seeks to seduce or impart an emotion or message. Needless to say, the act of making art or designing is a constant and recursive redefinition and reinterpretation of cultural norms and tastes.

In this fluid environment, many designers and artists struggle to produce commercially viable yet personally meaningful work (Mc Robbie, 2002). Compelling stories from the Internet boom years of the 1990s fed fanciful notions of creative freedom, design stardom, and self-expression. This "entrepreneurial spirit" arguably has fueled and thus expanded the creative practice but it has also brought about some unfortunate pitfalls. For example, Angela McRobbie's work on the post-Fordist culture industries in Great Britain highlights New Labour's efforts to dismantle the social aspects of the work environment. These trends she maintains are concomitant throughout the world and are marked by a "Hollywoodization" of work that is exemplified in the freelance practice where employment may be scarce at times and abundant at others. McRobbie maintains that the independent producer is often set

outside of office or factory-based social networking and therefore at risk of being exploited by the corporate organization. Technology, she argues, also brings about similar weakened position for the individual creative producer by blurring the private and professional realms (2002).

When examining the online design and art communities expansion of the traditional practice we see that, in recent years, a growth of resources, tools, and a shared ethos have fostered something far more complex than McRobbie's envisioned reality (Turner-Rahman, 2005). Social networking in a number of online communities often supplements professional interactions and sublimates for work-based friendships. Whether these connections foment, say, political organization and activism geared at supporting and protecting the individual practitioner from the corporate organization may be immaterial as the parallel practice – based on producing goods and services designed exclusively for other networked designers and artists – arguably redefines somewhat the work dynamic. Design portals and blogs offer up a wealth of assets such as personal and professional advice, freeware applications, low cost downloadable materials and resources, and social networking opportunities. It is important to note, however, that online community sites do not often offer economic assistance or social programs, such as healthcare insurance, for the struggling artist or designer. Traditional professional groups, such as the American Institute of Graphic Artists (AIGA), that require membership fees may offer limited health care options for the freelance designer but broader more general assistance is still beyond the purview of online creative communities. It will be interesting to see how, as the parallel practice develops, this aspect of our working lives and others such as unionization are addressed. Regardless, the changes brought about by networking have some inimitable qualities that set it apart from the traditional artistic career or design practice.

Rise of the Amateur

While not immune from the issues concerning worker's rights and privileges, artists and designers seem to live and work in rarefied worlds. Creative visual production defines much of the cultural environment within which we live. There is, however, a certain corporate moderation of creative thinking that ultimately dictates cultural tastes through the promotion of select art and design work. Matthew Soar, in evoking Bourdieu to explain the role of designers in contemporary society,

remarks how limited the role of the designer may be (Soar, 2004). Soar's assessment that graphic design, in particular, may be "immaterial" in that it is part of a larger social context and stuck "between the realms of production and consumption; between the spheres of work and leisure" mirrors Maud Lavin's statement that designers have a hamstrung power (Lavin, 2001). While Lavin's work criticized the graphic design and advertising service industries, one could extrapolate and apply the criticism to the multitude of design professions that converge on general design portal web sites.

It is interesting then to contextualize design work, for instance, that is produced in the parallel practice and sold to or shared with other artists and designers within the online community. The visual product is meant to advance the discourse of that community and the exchange of work somewhat mimics an open source exchange. Open source is a term that has come to mean specifically the distribution of computer code for individual development within a particular project such as computer applications or operating systems. The development of Linux, as an example, happens under the GNU or 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. Online discussions and shared code reveal who the key developers are with sophisticated understandings of the particular project. The more reputable developers facilitate further development of a project by moderating discussions, reviewing code, promoting changes in the code, and by mentoring other potential moderators. Reputation becomes motivation and one's status is usually indicative of the quality, ingenuity, or novelty of one's contribution. The fact that many produce demanding work for very little pay further reveals that the system works as a sort of gift economy.

In this open source model of exchange, theoretically anyone – amateur and professional alike – can advance a trend and garner peer recognition. Yet these concepts of sharing and peer promotion enabled by networked technologies are not new. In visual design, it is the blurred lines and chaotic interconnectedness between producers and consumers, within distinct small-scale markets outside of the commercial realm that are novel. An example of this would be a portfolio site with a link to an e-commerce page selling t-shirts produced by the designer. Both the portfolio and the t-shirts are produced for other designers and not necessarily for the general public. All visual products are an entrée into a community's creative

conversation. Novice designers can enter the discourse with professionals and thus alter it. Subsequently, that discourse may be absorbed back into and ultimately impact commercial design as well.

A peculiar by-product of mass incorporation of networked computing technologies is perhaps the increased critical analysis of the visual communicator's practice and autonomy that manifests itself as exploratory visual production. Just as the late 1980s saw the rapid growth of desktop computing technologies that brought new creative freedoms for traditional graphic designers, high speed, ubiquitous Internet connections and community portals foster similar self-determination for a number creative professionals. Desktop publishing, image-manipulation tools, and a host of related apparatuses provided a relatively low cost alternative to more cumbersome and awkward machinery or time-consuming layout techniques. As a result, the practice of visual communication opened slightly to admit the amateur designer. Far from being a true democratization however, the practice of graphic design, in the broad sense, expanded to incorporate a new generation of individuals who would enter into the practice not from the traditional approaches of education and apprenticeship, but who would approach the profession from a more technology-driven standpoint (VanderLans & Licko, 1993; Poyner, 2003).

This generation, I contend, exerted its power in the 1990s and forced a re-interpretation of visual design through their remediation of a plethora of visual artifacts, their reliance on networked communication, and their uncertainty regarding the conventional practice. In essence, the design-centered habitus had to grow to incorporate the new web design constituency. The relatively unexplored realm of graphic design for the web then prompted a flurry of experimentation. For example, the first mass-market visual web browser did not become widely used until late 1994 nonetheless a year later it had become a common interface to the Internet. By 1995, early visual web design tools were in wide use and the evolution of experimental interfaces happened quite rapidly. Steven Johnson, in *Interface Culture*, remarked at the time that the growing subculture of avant-garde web designers and their "flair for novelty" would push the art of interface design forward (Johnson, 1997, p. 224). Johnson realized that web-based artists and avant-garde designers were potentially a strong cultural force. Johnson promoted the idea that interface design would, perhaps, become a respected art form and earn the same serious critical attention as a more established art practice. Lev Manovich supports Johnson's assertions regarding the importance of interface design, by saying:

When you use the Internet, everything you access – texts, music, video, navigable spaces – passes through the interface of the browser and then, in turn, the interface of the [Operating System]. (Manovich, 2001, p. 64)

Manovich explains that the interface becomes “a filter for all culture” (Manovich, 2001, p. 64). Johnson, like Manovich, was quick to realize that the computer interface had become a significant and unique source of cultural representation (Johnson, 1997). The years since Manovich and Johnson wrote about interface design have seen an expansion of a number of design practices centered more or less completely within the virtual realm. Experimental web designers who maintain lucrative relationships with corporate clients often also engage in exploratory parallel practices. Their work is shared on portals designed to cater to other designers interested in advancing amorphous visual discourse and their personal technique.

When we consider the potential role of the amateur in the online creative community, open source and gift giving models of exchange, small-scale markets intended for other designers and artists, we begin to see the full potential of the parallel practice. The virtual world and the parallel practice, it seems, will continue to become further entwined. Designers and artists of all sorts co-mingle in a host of electronically mediated environments that until very recently did not exist. What is more, gaming and storytelling are now further diversifying the opportunities for a parallel art or design practice.

The Stories We Tell

What does the designer produce if not tethered to the requirements of a commercial design brief? The simple answer would be that the design practice becomes something akin to artistic exploration and self-expression. The more convoluted response however, is that there is an abundance of personal storytelling and design exploration happening in every conceivable form and fashion. Design, as I mean here, can run the gamut of web authoring and programming to video production to game design to photography and digital imaging. In some instances specialization has given way to generalization and whatever means suits the project is employed by the designer.

Storytelling, whether in non-linear video games or more traditional short films, is often codified in the language of film, comic books, and the fine arts. Designers and artists of all sorts engage with various aspects of the production process. Sometimes this may require taking on the multiple roles of director, producer, screenwriter, and even marketing specialist. At other times the focus is perhaps centered on one particular aspect of the process such as character design or, say, editing. An example of the former is a work by designer Brian Taylor called *Rustboy*. *Rustboy* is an animated film created as a part-time venture. Taylor uses older software and sophisticated techniques to produce very professional looking animations that are somewhat reminiscent of Hollywood director Tim Burton's work. Wanting to share his productions, Taylor began posting a diary with examples and short movies of his efforts. Taylor's marketing, design, and storytelling skills are all well developed and the project, as least initially, garnered much praise and attention from those both within and outside of various online design communities. At times the *Rustboy* project has even been partially financed from independent patrons. *Rustboy* not only highlights a somewhat successful parallel practice (I say "somewhat" as Taylor has recently been so focused on other projects that *Rustboy* seems to have fallen by the wayside) but also the desire to use storytelling to explore design tools and techniques in the service of narrative.

Similarly focused on visual narrative, *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. While this portion of the website is the center of exchange within this community it functions in a similar manner as Taylor's *Rustboy* website. Community members share information about their work processes and artistic technique in service of producing artwork that can be used for the production design of films, games, and other visual stories. While the depth and quality of the discussions and critiques vary, the breadth of mentors – some who are currently working in the film and video game industries - often provides the younger and more inexperienced artists not only with encouragement and critical assessment of their work but also with ample inspirational imagery. The amateur/professional discourse comes in the sharing of sketchbooks and completed renderings. The potential for the community-supported parallel practice comes in the form of self-produced publications, fine art prints and dvds of short films, animations, or motion graphics.

More conventional career building opportunities are offered in job postings on the site.

Other community sites such as *Flickr.com*, a free photography storage and exchange site, and *illustrationfriday.com*, an weekly illustration exhibition site, cultivate various means of visual storytelling that, while not enabling the parallel practice per se do offer ample opportunity to make social connections, share one's work, and to build a professional reputation. Naturally these are but a few of the vast number of sites that cater to a range of creative individuals.

Conclusion: New Spaces/New Practices

Perhaps the most intriguing and novel form of the parallel practice is the design of synthetic artifacts for the virtual worlds of massively multiplayer online roleplaying games (MMORPGs). It is therefore the logical extension of the storytelling practices and the online community forums and social spaces. The work of economist Edward Castronova of Indiana University highlights the growing importance and economic power of synthetic worlds. In an article entitled *Virtual Worlds: A First Hand Account of Market and Society on the Cyberian Frontier*, Castronova made the claim that a MMORPG called *Everquest* had an GDP somewhere near that of Bulgaria (Castronova, 2001, p. 33). The growing economic potential is made apparent by the exchange of real money for virtual products. In fact, Castronova estimates that the exchange of real dollars for synthetic products reached \$100 million dollars this year (2005).

While online creative communities bring about opportunities for parallel practices, they often cannot provide an adequate income or the progressive social programs that safeguard the independent producer. The discourse shared by amateurs and professionals alike not only reveal the need for an expansion of the role of the online community but also highlight the potential for new creative endeavors. Online gamespaces cater to literally hundreds of thousands of players or "inhabitants" and, unlike many other online ventures, are often profitable. The exchange of virtual goods and services for real money has provided a lucky and dedicated few with a modest income. Considering the growth of creative communities, open source projects, the popularization and intense global interest in the synthetic worlds presented in MMORPGs or purely social virtual environments such as *Second Life.com*, it is only a matter of time before design and art efforts

support legitimated careers and nearly full income practices. When this happens, the parallel practice will mature into a host of new professions. It is with keen interest that we should regard this development and support the growth of online social institutions that champion independent creative producer.

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