Chapter 15

Deviously Deviant: The Strange Tapestry that is deviantART.com

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ABSTRACT

This chapter presents the unique case of deviantART.com – a popular social networking and image-sharing platform for artists. The chapter introduces and describes the platform, its history, and some of the features the platform offers. It forwards a brief summation of current research, outlines issues emerging from that research, explores the strength and weaknesses of that research, and discusses some of the many difficulties related to researching the platform and its members. The chapter includes a discussion of “creativity” and the economically centric rhetoric and misconceptions latent in hyped popular discourse surrounding the rise of a “creative economy.” A discussion of educational issues from an art education perspective is also included in the chapter, which concludes with a presentation of larger social and policy issues related to deviantART.com.

INTRODUCTION

DeviantART(dA) is a global social networking collective of more than 32 million members, known as deviants, and 291 million user-produced artifacts, known as deviations, uploaded by dA members (dA, 2014). Deviations include digital and non-digital art, such as drawings, paintings, photographs, sculptures, photo-manipulations, fan art and video game designs. The current dA database includes 2,400 descriptive categories to classify and index deviations. (Additional forms of cultural production uploaded to dA include seemingly innumerable and evolving list of media, genres, and styles including role-playing activities, poetry, fiction, animation, comics, skins, tattoos, graffiti, original characters, wallpaper, stock images, artisan crafts, member resources, tutorials, commentary, posters, graphic design, illustration, industrial design, theater design, web interfaces, architectural designs, and ceramics.) When deviants create and envision deviations that require new descriptors, dA staff add new categories (Bazargan, 2011). When deviants upload new deviations, the site obliges them to tag the work with descriptive and searchable categories, some

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of which are listed above. Tags build an indexed hierarchy which aides semantic search paths within the site for deviants and visitors.

Scholars seeking to build a picture of dA for dA outsiders have likened the platform to a kind of artist’s alley (Perkel, 2011), or an exhibition hall at an art or comic convention; a global exhibition space where anyone over 13-years of age can set up a digital booth and display work for free (Jones, 2012). Artists establish online digital homepages – similar to booths at a craft or art fair - where they display their work and provide opportunity for personal interaction. As with booths at an artist conventions, online visitors many pass on by (click on to another artist’s home page), stop and look at the artist’s work (clicking through the artist’s work and reading the artist’s commentary with each image), or collect the artist’s work for their own collection. Visitors may also engage the artist in an online conversation in an asynchronous version of starting a discussion at an artist’s booth. Key informants interviewed by Jones found the art convention analogy an accurate and insightful description of the dA site.

Outsiders to dA often misunderstand the platform’s name as descriptive of the content posted on the site. For dA CEO and co-founder Angelo Sotira, known as spyped (dA) in dA, deviants indicated not aberrant works of art, but a welcoming online collective for cultural producers whose work and identity remained outside the purview and concern of more culturally enfranchised art markets, institutions and practitioners. The merging of “deviant” and “art” in the platform’s name lead to confusion among outsiders who have misunderstood the name deviantART as descriptive of the kinds of the content posted on dA (Bazargan, 2011). Instead, the title intended a welcoming space for self-identified outsiders - disenfranchised artists and creative producers. Free membership invited artists into a welcoming art world (Becker, 1984; Danto, 1964) where deviating from the norm tapped a communitarian internet culture (Castells, 2001) of artists and creative individuals. Originally envisioned as a music-sharing site in 2000, dA founders drew inspiration from rock iconoclast Frank Zappa’s statement: “Without deviation from the norm, progress is not possible” (Bazargan, 2011; Wang, 2011; yokom, 2005). Rather than aberrant content and perverse membership, visitors to dA encounter a lavish display of aesthetic production, art, and visual culture. Visitors encounter deviants representing various levels of achievement and development from 13-year-olds drawing with crayons to professional designers and artists and everything in between.

“Deviating from the norm” culture remains a centerpiece of dA’s identity. On site’s 14th birthday in August of 2014 spyped wrote:

We [dA] are the movement for the liberation of creative expression.

We believe that art is for everyone, and we’re creating the cultural context for how it is created, discovered and shared.

Artists love us because we are an inclusive and supportive community. We help them find their identity through self-expression. We provide the tools, resources and exposure to enable them to become better, more successful artists. We inspire people to create art by feeding their creativity. (Sotira, 2014, para 4)

“DeviantART” signals deviating - a charge against the social mechanisms that establish (presumably) a belief in a monolithic institutional art world; a world that enfranchise some cultural practices while dismissing others (Wang, 2011). That deviation ethos is coded into the platform’s insider diction and jargon. Members are identified as deviants (italics for emphasis). Deviants’ uploaded cultural products identified as deviations. The dA front page recognizes individual deviants for deviousness, e.g., outstanding commitment and service to the dA collective. Staff and volunteers