

## Authorship and Editorial Control in Websites

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RE: Genre analysis of user-centric websites

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### Introduction

Traditionally, websites were created and maintained by the author, be it an individual or internal community. Content was produced and updated solely by these authors, and user experiences were generally one-sided. Information architecture (IA)—defined as the factors that lead site design, such as color scheme, site navigation and layout, and graphical elements—was directed toward offering content to the user. In the late '90s, the internet landscape made a shift in authorship. While user accounts on websites was still a relatively new feature, a handful of sites saw enormous potential in harnessing user interactivity and took it to a new level. In the Fall of 1998, Tom Fulp officially formed Newgrounds.com, a website that featured cartoons and games created using Macromedia Flash. This content was submitted by members of the site, and was handpicked by Newgrounds editorial staff. In 2000, the site created an automated manager for user-submitted content, known as the Portal. The site also featured a forum for its members. Newgrounds has since developed into a digital society with its own criteria for interaction. As Linda Driskill suggests in her essay on how to go about analyzing documents and forms of writing, “rhetorical analysis of transcribed protocols might be able to show how norms and values are transmitted, enacted, negotiated, and affirmed.”<sup>1</sup> I intend to analyze how this discourse community started and developed, and what implications this has on the internet experience currently and in the future.

### Content Control and Authorship

Newgrounds began as a site to showcase Fulp’s works. Over time, it became so popular that regular visitors and personal friends asked to have their work on his site. Rapidly, Fulp received more Flash movies than he could review, and so expanded by hiring on staff. From there, as demand increased, the Portal was created to manage the process of submission and uploading automatically. Eventually, reviewing became a baroque process again, and Fulp made the move to allow Newgrounds members the ability to rate content as it came in through the Portal.<sup>2</sup>

Certainly, this could be considered a paradigm shift for Newgrounds, but also for the internet as a whole. Members were now able to post comments on the page of any particular Flash movie they viewed, and they could give ratings on various criteria such as graphics, interactivity, and humor. By including members in editorial decisions, Newgrounds allowed users to regulate content that appeared on the site—whether or not they were authors of the movies.<sup>2</sup>



## Audience and Discourse Community

The audience Newgrounds attracts are generally users from the same demographic group as Fulp: young males who are technologically fluent and enjoyed humor and violence. The movies feature a wide range of themes: ultra-violent cartoons, such as the Madness series, which features a simply drawn character who uses firearms and anything he can get his hands on to mow down legions of foes; music videos show an individual's interpretation of a song, often in ways that a music video as seen on TV could never achieve; humorous movies that go from enactments of one-liners, to completely random and nonsensical (but hilarious) Flash; experimental, artsy flicks that move beyond Flash and into the realm of film. The vast majority of Flash on the site are devoid of any political or religious content, with most users opting to focus on themes that they themselves enjoy, and thusly by the general collective of Newgrounds members.

In addition to the rating and commenting system, members also populate an active forum, which at any given moment, has over 500,000 topics and nearly nine million individual posts.<sup>3</sup> Topics of discussion range from technical questions regarding the use of Macromedia Flash, conversations over favorite pieces, to members bragging about their gaming consoles.

Among members, there is a complex system of jargon at work, with the majority of terms being acronyms and nicknames for longer, technical terminology. As Teresa Harrison says, "Communities of thought render rhetoric comprehensible and meaningful. Conversely, however, rhetorical activity builds communities that subsequently give meaning to rhetorical action."<sup>4</sup> In other words, Newgrounds-specific jargon helps to build a sense of identity and uniqueness to that community, but it is also the community that renders such rhetorical content valid and important. Due to lexicon regarding Macromedia Flash, many terms are given new meaning. For example, if "event" pops up in a discussion regarding Flash, the user is most likely referring to how to programmed, timed action. The site forum also is influenced by the general shorthand commonly used in text messaging and instant messaging, with some users abbreviating such words as "you" to simply "u", and "lol" as shorthand for "laughing out loud". Some posts' lexicon borders the extreme, as seen in the following excerpt, taken from a topic titled, "Problems with Arrays."

### Jmtb02 says

Having a slight problem I haven't had to deal with before.

```
for (i=0; i<_root[("lev"+curWave)].length; i++) {  
totEne += _root[("lev"+curWave)[i]];  
}
```

The loops runs correctly, its just when it gets into the totEng += part, it can't read the array value. The syntax is obviously wrong for this line, so does anyone know how to dynamically pull the array value for (lev+curWave)[i] without actually writing out lev0[i], lev2[i], etc.?

### Dfox says

If it's a global var, would this do it?

```
totEne += _root[_root["lev" + curWave]][i]];
```

Clearly, only those who are fluent in Macromedia Flash programming could carry out such a conversation. Harrison remarks that, "the ability to understand and use the complex jargon...is a sign of group membership and an indication that one shares in the worldview of that group."<sup>4</sup> Such exclusivity creates internal dynamics of authority. Within Newgrounds, and its forums, authority is uniquely created. In addition to having extensive experience of the various programs used to create Flash movies, members who are actively involved in the rating process can garner authority as well. Authority in relations to Newgrounds takes two forms: the traditional authority of knowledge, and having hefty voting power. The site features a tracking system that gives "experience points" whenever a member

performs a rating on a movie. Experience points are also rewarded when a member reports (or in Newgrounds-speak —“blows the whistle”) objectionable content. After editorial review by the staff of Newgrounds, the content is deemed unfit for the site, experience points are then awarded to the whistle-blower. If they deem it harmless, the whistle-blower loses points. Experience points allow members to “level up”. As they level up, secrets are unlocked on the site, and their votes have more effect on the overall rating of movies they examine.<sup>5</sup> Newgrounds’ reward and penalty system is highly dynamic and forms an accessible, dedicated community of Flash aficionados.

### **Information Architecture and Usability**

Newgrounds’ information architecture has to be complete, accessible, and easy to understand in order for the site to remain functional. As the site evolved over the years, Newgrounds has undergone redesigns to accommodate new features and improve usability. The current site IA can be grouped by using criteria of content interaction in the following way:

- **The Flash Portal**

The heart of the site lies in the Portal, where members pass judgment on new, incoming Flash documents.

- **Permanent Content (Games, Toons, Collections, and Series)**

Once a Flash movie becomes popular enough, a Newgrounds editor may move it from the vast sea of Flash, into one of the above listed categories. Within each general subheading, which each have their own button on the main navigation bar of the site, are many smaller categories that are grouped by topic or subject. For example, a racing game will fall under the category of “Driving”. In Toons, a movie that is somber in tone will likely be found in the “Serious Shorts” section. These four main navigation points serve as a vast showcase of high-quality Flash content, in the same spirit as when the site was first begun.

- **Forums**

As discussed above, this portion is the hub of member interaction, and is heavily monitored by moderators (also known as mods) for objectionable topics or comments. Infractions are typically punished by removing the account of the offender, according to their posted rules.<sup>6</sup>

### **Implications for the Future**

Since 2000, the prevalence of user-regulated websites like Newgrounds has flourished. The one common trait among the most successful seems to be a dedicated user group. College-Humor.com taps into another vast core demographic group: college students. Formed in 1999 for virtually the same purpose as Fulp’s, to swap photos and videos, it has since grown into one of the top humor sites online. While the site has an editorial staff that handpicks all the content, users are the sole source of site content. With the widespread accessibility to complex server technology such as MySQL and PHP, the ease of allowing members to become site editors and contributors is allowing the internet to grow into its mushrooming interactive role.

This is the internet landscape that I am most familiar with, and it is expected of any website designer or programmer to be skilled in these types of coding language. In addition, it also requires a deep understanding of how online language and discourse is assisted or hampered by site design and features. Clients expect to be able to make use of whatever features they themselves have come across, and find useful for use on their site, and as such, we must be kept current on trends and concepts.

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<sup>1</sup> Driskill, Linda. Understanding the Writing Context in Organizations. Central Works in Technical Communication. Ed. Johndan Johnson-Eilola, Stuart A. Selber. New York: Oxford U. Press, 2004. 55-69.

<sup>2</sup> Newgrounds Literature. Ed. Tom Fulp. 1996-2006. 21 September 2006 <<http://newgrounds.com/lit/history.html>>.

<sup>3</sup> NG BBS. Ed. Tom Fulp, Wade Fulp. 2006. 21 September 2006 <<http://newgrounds.com/bbs/>>.

<sup>4</sup> Harrison, Teresa M. Frameworks for the Study of Writing in Organizational Contexts. Central Works in Technical Communication. Ed. Johndan Johnson-Eilola, Stuart A. Selber. New York: Oxford U. Press, 2004. 255-267.

<sup>5</sup> Newgrounds Literature. Ed. Tom Fulp. 1996-2006. 21 September 2006 <[http://newgrounds.com/lit/portal\\_faq.html](http://newgrounds.com/lit/portal_faq.html)>

<sup>6</sup> Newgrounds.com: BBS Rules. Ed. Tom Fulp. 1996-2006. 21 September 2006 <<http://newgrounds.com/bbs/rules.html>>