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Abstract

The word *prosumer* is a contraction of the words *producer* and *consumer* and it is used in this paper to refer to youth who are producing their own videos in their own time drawn from their consumption of popular media. In a networked, participatory culture prosumers have far-reaching consequences for art education. Examples are offered from parodical and socially transgressive videos, which are among the most common by youth on YouTube. Enabled by the technology, youth are engaging in creative activities that are changing the nature of learning in society in the direction of affinity-based, socially networked peer participation. Implications for art education include: acknowledging the developmental needs served by affinity based networks; teaching the skills of time-based media; and learning to negotiate between the demands of institutional learning verses the hedonistic, oftentimes transgressive culture of youth.

Key Words: Prosumer, Participatory Culture, Youth, YouTube

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The YouTube video *New Sidekicks* by mid-teen Forrest Whaley is a parody of the superheroes Batman and Robin, who are usually presumed to be heterosexual. It starts with Robin offended by Batman's introduction of Bathound and Batgirl. Why does Batman need further sidekicks? Batman tells Robin that Batgirl has "huge boobs" and that people think the dynamic duo is gay, to which Robin replies, "Wait, were not gay? I thought you were just playing hard to get." The video continues with equally transgressive material. Batman smokes Batweed, Bathound has sex with Robin, there is scatological material, and Batgirl turns out to be a klutz more interested in shopping than solving crime. Most of Forrest's videos, as here, are enacted with animated Lego characters, although he also features in some of his videos. On his website, he describes himself as "The legendary filmmaker."

Forrest is just one example of countless others like him who are uploading their self-motivated, self-generated videos to YouTube. In this paper I examine such videos of youth – children and adolescents - who are producing and sharing their own unsolicited videos as well as the far-reaching consequences they have for art education. That YouTube is a force to be reckoned with is clear from the fact that within five years of its introduction in 2005 it was attracting two billion visits a day, 24 hours of video are uploaded every minute (Metekohy, 2010), and that youth are among the most prolific contributors (Stangelove, 2010).

These youth are *prosumers*, a contraction of the words *producer* and *consumer* – youth who are producing their own imagery drawn from their consumption of popular mass media (Toffler, 1980). They operate in what Jenkins (2006) variously refers to as a "peer-to-peer culture" (p. 38) and a "participatory culture" (p. 1). Instead of merely consuming media, these youth participate in cultural exchanges as producers. While consuming professionally produced mass media, equally, they bounce off the productions of like-minded, similarly motivated amateur peers. YouTube is many things, including a traditional marketing tool, differing only from previous means of marketing by employing user-generated material to draw ears and eyeballs to advertising (Burgess & Green, 2009; Snickars & Vonderau, 2009). But as Strangelove (2010) comments, "The irony of YouTube is that, as an advertising-driven commercial enterprise, it

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demonstrates the strength of the audience's desire for an alternative to commercially produced content" (p. 7). For youth, as Muller (2009) claims, "YouTube is first and foremost a cultural space of community building and shared experience" (p. 126). It is this conception that I explore below.

New Concepts for a Networked Culture

First proposed by the futurologist Toffler in 1980, the word *prosumer* describes what has become a pervasive socio-cultural phenomenon among the connected generation, or "generation C", the generation of digital natives (Picket, 2011). Toffler foresaw that with the availably of low-cost networked technology, the roles of producers and consumers would implode. Instead of merely consuming mass media, people would be able to participate in cultural exchanges as producers in an unprecedented way. Since youth have proven able to take to the new technologies like fish to water, it is not surprising that they are among the most active of prosumers in a networked culture. Consumers of culture were once regarded as passive and effectively brainless, an idea captured by reference to television as the "boob tube." Transmission came from far away, as in the word *tele;* it originated from someone else, somewhere else. By contrast, the idea of an active consumer is captured by the very word *YouTube* where the emphasis is on *you* and not just to receive, but also to participate.

Jenkins et al (2009) define participatory culture in a way that perfectly describes the dynamics among prosumers and the circumstances they are exploiting on YouTube:

> A culture with relatively low barriers to artistic expression and civic engagement, strong support for creating and sharing creations, and some type of informal mentorship whereby experienced participants pass along knowledge to natives. In a participatory culture, members also believe their contributions matter and feel some degree of connection to one another (at the very least, members care about others' opinions of what they have created) (p. xi) .

A participatory culture shifts the focus of creation from the individual to community engagement, to collaboration and networking. It calls upon what Jenkins et al (2009) call "distributed cognition", which means not only facility with technology but also the social skills to draw upon the knowledge of others (p. 70). It employs what Gee (2003) calls "distributed knowledge" where knowledge resides not in any one person, text, or technology, but is distributed across people, texts and technologies that are geographically separated yet networked, where knowledge resides within the network (p. 184).

Levy (1997) similarly refers to "collective intelligence", the ability to pool knowledge and compare notes with others towards a common goal. In contextualizing this idea, he describes three broad kinds of groups: organic groups like families and tribes; organized social groups like nations and religions; and informal, self-organized groups. He argues that the newfound popularity of the latter are a response to the deterioration of space and the declining loyalties people feel toward organized groups. Levy also refers to self-organized groups as knowledge communities, characterized as "voluntary, temporary and tactical affiliations defined through common intellectual enterprises and emotional investments" (cited in Jenkins, 2006, p. 137). They operate as self-sustaining systems out of mutual interests and a reciprocal exchange of knowledge and acknowledgement. Jenkins (2006) proposes that fan groups may well be the most fully realized version of such informal, self-organizing groups. He (2009) notes that fans make no distinction between their intellectual and emotional commitments. Fans have always defined themselves though their affinities rather than locality; while fan groups are now facilitated by the "rapid many-to-many communications" of the Internet (p. 137), they were virtual communities long before the advent of electronically networked communities.

YouTube, like the participatory culture as a whole, has been attacked as narcissistic (Keen, 2007), but as Lange (2009) argues, the desire to gain someone's attention, the first step in forming any relationship whether real or virtual, is basic to human nature. As such, all self-generated YouTube videos by youth can be considered an "attempt to establish communicative connections to people, often members of a social network" (p. 71). Agreeing

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that most videos are concerned with establishing and maintaining affinity, Gee (2003) adds that affinity groups are marked by both the sharing of a common endeavor and a sense of affinity that exits irrespective of race, classand gender, where the social production of meaning is more than individual interpretation multiplied; they represent a qualitative difference in the ways sense is made of cultural experience. And as Jenkins et al (2009) make clear in their above definition of a participatory culture, it is critical for participants to feel connected to others.   Prosumers are motivated "in part, because they feel the emotional support of a community eager to see their productions" (p. 116).

Developmental Functions

These two symbiotic features of fandom mentioned above – intellectual challenge and emotional support – lead art educator Manifold (2009) to adopt what she calls "a semiotic affective approach" (p. 259).   She argues that it is necessary to consider not only how the products of fandom may be interpreted as signs, but the intense emotional engagement of fans, for it is the latter that best indicates the depth of the developmental functions played by fandom. For youth, fan communities represent a space in which to develop identity in terms of self-efficacy; exercising curiosity; meeting challenge; attaining public recognition; and enabling social interaction and support from like-minded, similarly focused others.

In general terms, youth's facility with networked technology helps to distinguish them from their parents and teachers; the digital divide is generational as much as anything else. More specifically, developmental functions are apparent with the numerous videos that involve Barbie accidents, Barbie torture, and Barbie death. That children have been destructively violent towards their toys for a long time, including girls to their dolls, is well documented in 19th century literature (Mitchell & Reid-Walsh, 2002). Brown (1998) writes not only of the "use value" of toys to children but their "misuse value" and of children's "irregular reobjectification" (p. 954). Examples include sending dolls careering down banisters, breaking their noses, and staging doll funerals. Just prior to the introduction of YouTube such behavior was observed as a common practice among both boys and

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girls towards Barbie dolls (Kuther & McDonald, 2004; Nairn, 2005). Nairn (2005) argues that mutilating Barbie functions in complex ways to support life transitions, especially for preteen girls, who in preparation for adolescence must put aside what they consider childish things. Kuther and McDonald (2004) speculate that for young teens Barbie mutilation arises from a rejection of the physical perfection Barbie represents and from ambivalence about adopting a feminine gender role that involves a loss of voice. Silencing Barbie may be a symbolic representation of their own silencing.

YouTube Success

Today, what was once a private affair, confined to the bedroom among a few friends, is now public for the whole world to witness. In fact the remarkable success of YouTube is due in large part to making visible pre-exiting fan groups for movies and television programs (Jenkins, 2006), as well as commonly shared activities that previously remained private. Apart from youth doing dreadful things to Barbie dolls and other toys, these include youth cross dressing, and silly and scatological family antics (Strangelove, 2010).

Equally important, the YouTube interface is cleverly designed to facilitate social networking. Every posted video is shown with a wealth of related materials to enable viewers to chose to spend a few minutes downloading a particular video rather than choosing from numerous others. These include the date a video was uploaded and the number of visits it has subsequently received as well as the number of visitors who voted "like" and "dislike." Faced with numerous videos to choose from, a video with thousands of visitors, especially if the likes greatly outnumber the dislikes is likely to attract more visitors than a video with only a few hundred visitors. Also included are all the comments visitors left as well as any exchanges that took place between visitors and the producer(s). Additionally posted are thumbnails of videos selected on the basis of a viewer's previous selections. If a visitor has recently selected *Gossip Girls*, videos involving *Gossip Girls* invariably appear when a visitor first reenters the YouTube interface. In this

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way the interface helps facilitate navigation among the millions of possible choices and encourages further participation among one's peers.

YouTube Videos

There are now many million of videos and many different kinds that influence and overlap one another. Strangelove (2010) notes that YouTube is so vast and complex that everyone writing on it – including books – necessarily limits their focus. Accordingly, it is impossible in one article to do more than highlight a few general features and a few examples of the kind of dynamics that operates between prosumers. I restrict myself to just a few kinds of videos that parody other cultural forms and transgress social norms. These are among the most common kinds of video by youth, and they cross numerous genres and subgenres that engage, for example, live actors, mashups of pre-existing material, animation, claymotion, legomotion, and many kinds of hybrid. Thus, my few examples do no more than scratch the surface. They have been chosen almost at random in an attempt to convey the experience of surfing through YouTube. To choose to focus on only the most popular, or only the most inventive, or only the most prolific of prosumers would have been to impose more order than exists among this material; it would give a false impression of a user's experience. The apparent randomness of the material is an inherent aspect of peer-to peer, participatory culture. Nevertheless, the examples below offer a flavor of its characteristics: the extraordinary range of material, its inventiveness, and especially its socially transgressive nature.

Zombies

There are approximately 360,000 YouTube parodies of the current interest in zombies. They include simple shots of zombie toys moving across a floor, sometimes towards the camera with creepy music; legomotion; and whole real-life sequences. In *Real Zombie Attack*, by Fencewire7 two teen boys are chatting amiably when they see a Zombie attacking a small girl, the girl chases them up a lane and into their house, and her hands clutch at the window. The boys barricade themselves in only to discover their house is

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ransacked and everyone is dead. The end titles read, "The video you just saw was actual footage from an unknown place in Canada. The survivors in this video were dead when the camera was discovered. RIP Brandon Pombiere." Uploaded in December 2008 it had at the time of writing received 471,555 visitors with 404 likes and 436 dislikes.[i] Comments included, "wow that was so fake. The zombie was just a real person", to which the makers respond both verbally and with a new allegedly improved version.

Gossip Girls

Many videos are explicitly labeled as parodies, and there seem to be almost as many as there are films and television programs. There are 464 with titles like *Gossip Girls Parody*. *Gossip Girls Parody 1* by glamourgirl286 begins with three very early teen girls bitchily insulting each other. Then one of them dressed as a boy asks one of the girls for a date, is rejected, hits the girl, turns to the camera, and with arms raised in a gesture of triumph proclaims, "Yeah, the man always gets the revenge." But another girl responds "Listen freak, if you can take your Romeo and Juliet scene somewhere else. As you can see we're having a ragging party." The girls then dance and squirt the boy with water. The three then present themselves close up to the camera and one says, "Hi guys. Hope you liked it. It was meant to be a parody even if it didn't look like it." Finally they introduce each other. Uploaded in February 2011 it had only received 89 views, 2 likes and 1 dislike and no comments, but it is in competition with numerous other similar videos.

Will it Blend?

There are also spoofs on forms that have been developed especially for YouTube. For example, there are numerous takeoffs of videos made especially for YouTube by Blendtec, a manufacture or blenders. They feature a middle-age man in a white coat experimenting with blending everything from candy to an iPod. Youth produce their own amateur versions with an equally unlikely long list of products they blend; glow sticks, matches, donuts, soap, a rubber duck and all kinds of incongruous foods that produce

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utterly disgusting messes. Combining professional and amateur versions there are about 41,700 examples. A spoof on this genre is *Will it Blend: Water*, from Spazproductions.   A mid teen blends water, claiming "something that has not been done before." Having poured a bowl of water into the blender he pushes "the stupid button." Reaction was mixed, from "ur vids lagg u need better camcorder" to "Try some gun powder and primers next time", and "lol you're not original." Uploaded in November 2007 it had received 7,010 visits, 21 likes, 26 dislikes and 47 comments.

Sex and Violence

Many videos are socially transgressive. Sex, drugs, violence and general mayhem are common topics. Many teen videos experiment with sexual roles. One teen, known only as Craig, has created a series of videos of fictional, story-driven enactments of his own life with titles like *Drugs, Halloween*, and *Party*. In *Craig's Girlfriend Episode 2*, his girlfriend is a heavily made up boyfriend, with exaggerated lipstick. They kiss for a very long time while two other friends try to point out that his girlfriend is a boy.

Many movies are violent. *Pet Violence Part 1 Trash Movie* consists of soft toys reenacting the producer's birth and then the producer killing his mother with scissors through her head accompanied by much blood. Among the numerous topics which are enacted with Lego are The Black Opps and Nazi Zombies which are exceptionally violent The non-stop, fast-paced action mayhem involve numerous characters having their heads blown apart with much blood and gore.

Movie-in-Minutes

The movie-in-minutes genre takes many forms of which there are about 54,000 examples. *Harry Potter, Star Wars, Lord of the Rings* and *Twilight* are particular favorites. *Movie in Minutes – Titanic* by nigahiga is an especially popular video. It consists of several episodes taken directly from key moments in the film. In the first episode two late teen Asians, both boys but one wearing a wig and make-up to appear as a girl, move toward and circle one another in rapturous appreciation of both each other, and by means of a

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mutual gaze, also with their audience. The girl says to the boy, " I want you to draw me wearing only this" (and shows a drawing of a big jewel). This cuts to a shot of a hairy armpit that zooms out to reveal her lying on a couch. In the next episode she is being held up by the boy and claims to be flying, but the boy is having a hard time keeping her upright because, as he declares, "your so fat." In the next episode he tells her the ship is sinking, that there is water everywhere, and she replies, "But Jack its me." At this point the film appears to suggest that her waters have broken. In the penultimate scene they are holding hands as he slowly sinks and dies. He seeks promises that she will never let go and brush her teeth more often.   She declares, "I promise Jack, just shut up and die already." He falls asleep and their hands part. In the final scene she looks at the drawing and proclaims, "Oh my God it's beautiful." Uploaded in December 2008 it had received nearly 11 million views, over 62,000 likes, and over 54, 000 comments, mostly very appreciative, such as "Its better than the actual movie."

This real-life actors version was then repeated scene for scene, word for word, in *Movie in Minutes –Titanic (Animated version)* by curtisceationz. In yet another version, one that illustrates the common phenomenon of the parody of a parody, another group, YTonCrack, have speeded up the original with the voices now making silly sounds. It is called *Movie in Minutes - Titanic on crack*. It has less than 8,000 visits, and only a few comments.

With a completely different approach, five Asian children known as jogomjo456 produced a version of Titanic filmed in a lounge room. The quality is poor, but the use of angles, high and low, the use of different framing devices such a close ups, and subtitles that help indicate the action, is impressive. When the ship hits the iceberg the camera shakes and the children fall on the floor. It starts with two children playing rock, paper, and scissors to win a ticket on the Titanic, a humorous approach that is maintained by Jack being played by a much younger child than the girl.   In yet another version two girls play the leads, one with a beard and mustache painted on. There are many more examples, with over 1,500 different versions of this one movie alone.

In summary, the videos feed off both their media models and other productions by their peers. Some are parodies of parodies. Many are inane,

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violent, and scatological or are otherwise politically incorrect. Some play with sexual orientation and gender identity. Each is part of a transgressive culture of pleasure, fun, and humor.

Where is Formal Art Education?

The culture of formal education and peer-to-peer participatory culture are very different. Gee characterizes formal educational systems as "conservative" verses informal learning, affinity spaces related to popular culture as "experimental" (in Jenkins, 2009, p. 11). While students learn how to navigate bureaucracies in schools, working on the net teachers them how to operate in an "ad-hocracy" (p. 75). In schools knowledge has traditionally been considered the province of the teacher and the institution they represent in the classroom. The knowledge they impart is approved by expert authorities. By contrast, a participatory culture operates on the basis that knowledge is distributed among all participants and is self-regulated. The contrast is identical to traditional academic publication verses personal blogging. This journal, for example, submits the papers of would-be authors to a filtering, gatekeeping process involving recognized experts; personal blogging is an unfiltered free-for-all.

Traditional schooling thus stands apart from and is often opposed to what is happening as part of students' everyday lives everywhere but inside schools. And no matter how much we may want to maintain the status quo it is increasingly clear that to be relevant to how students operate outside school, schools must learn to adapt to the participatory culture. Rather than setting themselves apart, schools must find ways to contribute. Meadows (2008), who has worked for many years with a diverse range of self-organized systems, offers hope. He claims, "We can't control systems or figure them out. But we can dance with them!" (p. 170).

The Digital Dance

Learning to do a digital dance is today the job of the art educator. The time when art education was primarily about protecting youth from the insidious influences of the media (e.g. Feldman, 1982) are long gone.

Equally, the time when art education consisted primarily of imparting pre-existing knowledge (e.g., Greer. 1984) is over. If we want to have a real impact on the lives of students we need to become part of their interactive audience, to become a player engaged with the media and helping to facilitate interaction among peers. While careful not to colonize their own culture of resistance to adult authority, seeming to condemn their efforts as trivial or worse, and thereby killing off the energy with which social networking conversations operate, we need to find ways to be supportive. This can be done in three ways: by acknowledging prosumers' efforts, the teaching of relevant skills, and attempting to negotiate between the transgressive fun of youth culture and institutional requirements of serious knowledge production.

The first and most basic support is to recognize that the subcultures of youth play important developmental roles, and ones that may be much closer to children's real needs than learning about dead artists or expressing their feelings about conventionally approved pro-social topics in school like friendship and family. In this regard, recognition means taking our cue from the approaches that youth make to cultural artifacts and in this sense adopting a student-centered approach.

Secondly, perhaps the most obvious support art education can offer is to teach a different skill set, not those of pre-industrial revolution media like painting and drawing, but those of the electronic revolution. Youth need instruction in time-based media skills. While some self-generated productions on YouTube are technically sophisticated, many are not; many lack the most rudimentary knowledge, for example, of camera angles, editing, or even how to focus. Youth know so much more than their teachers about their preferred cultural models, but very little about how to respond to them with technical proficiency. Students can repeat what their teachers currently impart about the formal elements and principles of static media, but they have little to go on except their own stumbling investigations regarding moving imagery. Not all users celebrate a DIY amateur aesthetic. Many are motivated in part by learning the requisite skills of shooting and editing in order to better express themselves and reach a wider audience. If their visual world primarily consists, not of static paintings and drawings, but

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moving digital imagery, it is the skills of moving digital imagery we need to be teaching. This is their expressive practice. Why wouldn't we want to join them by offering what knowledge and skills we have? And if we do not posses time-based media knowledge and skills, isn't it time to acquire them?

Third, and undoubtedly more challenging for teachers, is the willingness to negotiate between the demands of reason and order expected by the schooling system and the hedonism of the often irrational, resistant, and transgressive culture of youth. As evidenced in this paper, many videos on YouTube by school-aged youth are sexist, scatological, and utterly inane. They revel in thumbing their nose at authorities; they are a carnivalesque celebration of the politically incorrect. Teachers need to avoid destroying the transgressive fun-based culture from which unsolicited productions emerge while facilitating learning in an institutional setting that is undergrid by serious purpose.

With notable exceptions (e.g., Wilson, 2003), art teachers have generally avoided this issue by ignoring the culture of youth, and instead they have insisted that popular culture is debased and that fine art remains the content of art classes. But once admit that art education should engage with students own cultural expression and the question arises: How, on the one hand, is it possible to operate within institutions of formal education and on the other hand to engage the sheer fun of youth's culture? How is it possible to revision what has traditionally been considered bad behavior among students as playful exploration of the world they are grappling to understand?

In response, Wilson (2003) and others have argued for a third educational space, somewhere between the first space of formal schooling and the second space of unsupervised, self-generated learning. Examples of possible third spaces are after-school programs, community programs, or even informal engagements during lunchtime (Staikidis, 2006).

Additionally, media educator Buckingham (2003) advocates the idea of a playful pedagogy in which teachers engage with youth's affective investments in popular media and their own sense of agency. It is important to acknowledge that students as much as their teachers have the power to think, feel and create according to their own volition and to find

ways to relax the tight controls teachers often impose on both the processes and products of the art classroom, to open the classroom to the possibilities offered by peer learning in a participatory culture. This is not to condone offensive, anti-social values, but to acknowledge its developmental value and to channel such offence into productive activity. Contributing to the digital dance of peer-to-peer participation is now our challenge.

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Notes

[i] All statistics were accurate at the time of writing the final draft of this paper on July 9, 2011 and obtained from the YouTube interface.