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HARNESSING SERENDIPITY: A STUDY OF ACCIDENTAL CREATIVE COLLABORATIONS IN TWO ONLINE REMIXING COMMUNITIES

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Remixing describes the act of appropriating content from others and integrating that content with one's own creative manipulation in order to create derivative and new works. (Lessig, 2008). Prominent academics like Henry Jenkins (2006) have also argued that remixing offers a hands-on approach towards cultivating media/cultural literacy and encouraging creativity amongst young people. While there is much work focused on studying the activity of remixing itself, these are mainly focused on the idea of remixing as a model for encouraging and ensuring innovation. However, remixing as an activity practiced “in the wild” is much more complex and has characteristic dynamics on both the content and community fronts.

Some recent work has started to pay attention to the social dynamics and emergent network structure arising from remixing content creators (Cheliotis & Yew, 2009). Additionally, recent work has also paid attention to the dynamics and tensions that result from content being made open for reuse and remixing (Hill & Monroy- Hernández, 2013; Cheliotis, Hu, Yew & Huang, 2014). However, what this prior work has not examined is the unique – and sometimes unplanned - nature of remixing. It is this serendipity in the creative act of remixing that is the focus of this paper. Unlike traditional modes of online creativity and communication, we have found that remixing presents a unique set of opportunities and challenges which revolve around the issues of authorship, social norms/practices, network effects, and the articular technical features and affordances that promote the remixing of content.

In this paper, we will attempt to move beyond the individual case study by undertaking a comparative analysis of two highly successful online remixing communities: ccMixter, an online community devoted to the sharing and remixing of music, and Scratch, an online community focused on enabling young people to create and share interactive games and animations. This paper employs a mixed methods approach towards comparing both remixing communities. We utilized Social Network Analysis (SNA) as a means of characterizing the sharing and remixing activity in both communities. The SNA also

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functioned as a sampling method to identify a small core of users who were most active in each community. Interviews were then conducted with this set of core members.

We propose that the act of remixing can be characterized by the serendipitous discovery of source material which can be appropriated, and collaborators who can be harnessed, in previously unintended ways. For instance, in our interviews with ccMixer participants, we found that the process of remixing involves the serendipitous discovery of source material that can be appropriated and reused in a remixed work. RL, a highly prolific remixer on ccMixer, highlights this point in the following quote,

"Yeah, CC Mixer works because I would describe it as kind of a serendipitous musical discovery - development thing. But in this case we were - we wanted to create something and um - although we don't have anything in mind."

This quote suggests that remixing often takes place without an explicit intention or plan. Additionally, there is little need for explicit communication between the creators/authors of works in the remixing process. This results in a form of communication described as a "mixversation" (Lucas Gonze, cited in Stone, 2009) - an indirect form of communication where remixers acknowledge each other and promote each other's work through the reuse of each other's content. It bears emphasizing, that this mode of communication emerged quite accidentally, or serendipitously. This perhaps is due to the fact that remixing culture emphasizes the provision of credit and attribution, rather than asking for permission to reuse the works of others. Hence, what results are social norms to signal credit and provide acknowledgement for reusing the work of others. For instance, the young creators in Scratch's online community often communicate and provide validation for each other's work through the content itself. One area where this form of communication can be seen is in the community's preference for credit and attribution to be communicated through the content itself. This is despite the fact that the Scratch community website had a feature that provides automatic attribution for the source works sampled on each remixed work. The members of the community much preferred the provision of credit within the content itself seeing this as a more authentic and sincere way to communicate thanks and give credit to the source's authors (Monroy-Hernández, Hill, Gonzalez -Rivero & boyd, 2011).

Through the comparison of ccMixer and Scratch, we will provide a detailed understanding of the complex and multifaceted character of the creative and collaborative processes found in remixing. By focusing our attention on the serendipitous and indirect form of communication and collaboration in remixing, we aim to provide a richer and more detailed understanding of the characteristics and dynamics involved in the sharing and remixing of content online. In particular we find that the serendipitous process of discovering and employing source materials in one's remixes to be highly pertinent to many other online behaviors, such as the creation of memes or retweeting/reposting content on Social Networks. We ultimately hope to contribute to the literature by identifying ways in which to support serendipity and "mixversations" in online platforms. We make the argument that designing for reuse and remixing requires supporting serendipitous discovery of new content and new collaborators, as well as providing ways to signal intention, authorship, credit and thanks.

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