Inspiration, socialization, and skill acquisition in an amateur multimedia community

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Abstract
Online amateur multimedia communities are one of many places where informal, interest-driven learning is taking place. Therein, multimedia content creators can learn from one another and produce artifacts to share with fellow creators and others. This content analysis of forum postings in the Cold Hotdog community indicates that several factors serve as inspiration including cartoons, movies, and the encouragement of others; that self-deprecation, sarcasm, and humor are common; and that knowledge demonstrations, name-dropping, participation in the forums, and claims to methods of skill acquisition serve as status markers within the community. This analysis helps better understand the participants and one type of environment that one may encounter when trying to acquire and/or refine technical skills in a more informal, less-structured online environment. It is clear that community participants are responsible for not only learning and demonstrating technical skills but that they have to learn and demonstrate different social skills as well.

1. Introduction
The increased interest in massive open online courses (MOOCs) provided by organizations like Udacity [30] and Coursera [5] that offer technical courses as well as the interest and development of tools like Scratch [27] and Alice [11] that make it easier to learn how to program indicates that technical skills are becoming increasingly more important and that there are more diverse ways to acquire them. Indeed, interested parties are not limited to formal course offerings; for example, one could take Computer Science courses through Khan Academy [16] or learn about writing for the web at P2PU [24]. Even the Obama Administration has started an initiative to promote digital literacy training and services as these skills are increasingly seen as necessary upon entering and navigating the job market [22]. The aforementioned structured online offerings can help those who perhaps do not have the opportunities to learn these types of skills in schools, libraries, or community centers or those who are self-driven. However, what if the courses or topics therein are not appealing or if structured learning is not how one learns best? Finding and participating in an online community centered on one’s interests is a way around this hurdle, and oftentimes one picks up skills while participating in online communities even when that was not the initial intent [8].

Online multimedia communities are one place where this type of informal, interest-driven learning takes place. Many of these communities provide a platform for users to submit content, get feedback on submitted content, and discuss and debate submitted content with others who have similar interests. Communities with similar characteristics have been previously studied; for example, Jenkins et al. [10] study participatory cultures, their significance, and the skills youth need to participate in them. Similarly, Ito et al. [8] examine ways youth participate and engage in online multimedia communities, but what about communities or sites with more varied demographics like MOOCs [17], for example? What about communities in which individuals use tools that are not necessarily user-friendly and that require great time commitments? Work on motivation, socialization, and help seeking and giving has been conducted in the open source community (e.g., [6,18,23,28]). However, not as much is known about communities focused on multimedia content despite their presence, size, and the various types of skills that must be acquired in order to actively participate. Here, I examine one such community, the amateur multimedia community I call Cold Hotdog (CHD).

Cold Hotdog is an online community in which community members submit Flash videos, Flash games, audio files, and image files to be displayed and discussed on the site. The site owner and administrator posts multimedia files submitted by community members along with his own commentary to the main page of the site. In order to facilitate discussion, the site allows users to comment on individual media files.
that have been posted. They can also participate in the community by posting media or text in the community’s extensive forums, using the IRC channels, or through other sites like MySpace, Twitter, and Facebook.

This paper provides a content analysis of threads in one of the Cold Hotdog forums centered on Flash development. I describe community members’ inspirations for creating animations, social norms of the community, and status markers within the community, including self-reports on skill acquisition. This examination elucidates one type of environment that one may encounter when trying to acquire and/or refine technical skills in a more informal, less-structured online environment. It is clear that community participants are responsible for not only learning and demonstrating technical skills in these environments but learning and demonstrating different social skills as well. An understanding of the participants and these existing environments where individuals are acquiring technical skills can better inform the support and development of both these and other learning arenas with a similar focus and composition.

2. Related Work

In this section, I discuss related work concerning motivation and skill acquisition in online communities as well as social norms and practices in other online multimedia communities.

2.1 Motivation and Skill Acquisition in Online Communities

Open source communities and online creative communities [3,18,23] are two types of communities where work on motivation and skill acquisition has been previously conducted. Cook et al. [3] noted the importance of contribution assessment, support for learning, perceptions of audience, and tensions about commercialization amongst members of a community focused on the use and development of a music software package. Oreg and Nov [23] found that the software contributors to an open source project placed a greater emphasis on reputation-gaining and self-development motivations while the content contributors placed a greater emphasis on altruistic motives for their actions. Similarly, Lakhani and Wolf [18] found that enjoyment, user need, intellectual stimulation, and improving programming skills were top motivators amongst their survey respondents. Several of these topics also emerged within the Cold Hotdog forums analyzed for this paper including contribution assessment, support for learning, reputation gaining, and self-development.

Motivation has also been examined in online gaming communities. These communities are different from multimedia communities like Cold Hotdog, yet both communities require skills and knowledge that are not typically learned within traditional classroom settings and both can require a great deal of time and effort. Nick Yee [31] surveyed over 30,000 massively multiplayer online role-playing game (MMORPG) players over the course of three years and found that people spent an average of 22 hours playing per week. Yee also found that there were five motivations for playing including achievement, relationship, immersion, escapism, and manipulation (i.e., how inclined a user is to objectify other users and manipulate them for his/her personal gain and satisfaction) [31]. Males were more likely to be driven by achievement and manipulation. In this examination of CHD, reports of motivations that could fall under Yee’s achievement category did emerge from my sample, yet none of the other categories did.

In addition to types of motivation, Nick Yee [31] also reported that his survey participants, particularly the younger respondents, noted that their MMORPG experiences helped them gain and/or improve their leadership skills. Though I do not address leadership skills in this analysis, this indicates that real-life skills can be acquired and/or improved by participating in virtual environments.

Work in online gaming has also focused on the types of learning that take place within those communities. Constance Steinkuehler’s [29] cognitive ethnography examined the activities within MMORPGs and the ways that one became literate in the gaming space. Interestingly, she found that one prominent way of learning was through the apprenticeship system method and scaffolded interactions where users guided others through the completion of tasks [29]. Lindtner et al. [19] and Nardi et al. [21] found similar collaborative learning activity while conducting ethnographic fieldwork on practices in and around the World of Warcraft MMORPG. While observing people playing in a physically collocated setting, Lindtner et al. [19] noticed players intentionally sitting next to players who were playing the game so that they could talk to one another and learn from each other’s playing experience, even if they did not know the other person. Nardi et al. [21] focused more on how people worked together within the game world, yet they too noticed that people devised strategies and worked together to progress through the game. While Cold Hotdog is not a 3D virtual world in which users can explore and work together, there is evidence that there are some...
apprentice-mentor relationships in the community. Nevertheless, most of the ways in which CHD community members mentioned that they acquired their skills involved the use of tutorials, books, forum postings, and the reverse engineering of existing Flash files.

2.2 Online Multimedia Communities

Work in online multimedia communities in particular is also applicable, especially work conducted in two communities similar to Cold Hotdog: Animutation Portal [13,14,15] and Newgrounds [25,20]. Lori Kendall’s work on the Animutation Portal has focused on the communication and interactions within the community [14] and on the role of gender and power within the community [13,15]. In the course of observing the community and analyzing the forums, she found that most of the participants at Animutation Portal are young, white males in their early 20s that are typically from the United States or Canada [14] and that “community cultural knowledge may be as important or even more important and meaningful than technical or project-related knowledge” [15]. Posts in Cold Hotdog similarly indicate that many of the participants in the community fall within this age range and that some community members are even younger. Also similar to Kendall’s findings, Cold Hotdog members make a great effort maintaining the community and asserting their membership in the community.

In the Newgrounds community, Paolillo, Warren, and Kunz [25] utilize social network analysis and a corpus-based quantitative genre analysis to argue that the social structures in the community affect genre emergence and that members who create different genres of Flash movies behave differently within the community. Luther and Bruckman [20], on the other hand, address collaborations to create Flash movies in Newgrounds as well as two other unnamed communities. To conduct this work they analyzed data from the Newgrounds discussion forums and conducted interviews with 17 community members. Their work shows that most of the attempted collaborations fail mostly due to challenges with designing the project, managing the different participants in the collaboration, and combining the project pieces at the end. Problems with communication and motivation existed as well including difficulties motivating artists to continue working on collaborative projects when other interests competed for their time (e.g., full-time employment, schoolwork, and family life). Departing from Luther and Bruckman’s [20] study which addresses continuing motivation, this paper details reasons why participants were initially motivated to start participating, particularly examining encouragement from parents, teachers, and friends as well as the desire to emulate other art forms including cartoons, movies, and video games.

Lastly, work conducted by Mizuko Ito [9] and Katharina Freund [7] in other video-centric communities is also relevant. Ito [9] discusses a “peer based ecology of review and critique” where specialization and skill is rewarded and people are motivated “almost entirely through the force of systems of recognition and reputation.” Cold Hotdog members have ranks attached to their names in the forums and one way to change ranks is by participating in a tournament held each summer. Though ranks are not discussed much in the Cold Hotdog forums sampled, the type of reputation building and recognition that is demonstrated in the sample seems to function similarly to Ito’s [9] findings.

Freund [7], on the other hand, examines vidders and discovers different motivators such as music, a desire to tell a story that they feel is not already being told, or a desire to work on a particular concept or skill. Another motivator can be a prompt from the community. Perhaps answering these prompts is a way for vidders to gain reputation and recognition, and if that is the case, then the behavior exhibited in that community is not that different from what Ito [9] has observed. However, a potential key difference that I have observed in Cold Hotdog is gender. Though both communities center around similar tech-related interests and skill sets, Cold Hotdog appears to have demographics similar to the comparable community that Kendall [14] has examined (i.e., predominantly white and male), and as such, it is drastically different from the viding community, which is overwhelmingly female [4,7]. It is not clear how much of a difference these demographic differences have on social norms, inspiration, and motivation but it is a distinction that should be noted and requires further scholarly inquiry.

3. Methodology

In order to study inspiration for creating animations, social norms of the Cold Hotdog community, and status markers within the community, I collected and examined a theoretical sample of forum threads, which consisted of seven threads within the Flash Developers forum in the CHD community. Three threads were in the Flash Developers forum proper: “How did you learn Flash?”, “I seek a worthy Flash apprentice., Enquiry within”, and “Flash Apprentice: Here’s Your Chance, FIRST, YOU MUST PASS THE TEST.” The other four threads were in the Flash Tutorials sub-forum: “Official Tutorial Request
Thread”, “Tutorial: Simple Shooter Game”, Faq, Tips, Troubleshooting, & Tutorials”, and “So you wanna learn Flash.” These threads have been viewed tens of thousands of times and span roughly 4.5 years with the first post coming on March 13, 2005 and the last post coming on October 10, 2009 (see Table 1). These threads were all downloaded from the forums in October 2009 and were chosen either because they were pinned threads in the forum and thus deemed valuable by the community members or because they were highly viewed and addressed one or more of my research questions. I also wanted to focus on the Flash animators within the community, for they have to manage varied types of data representations (e.g., audio files, written texts, and still and moving graphics) and thus have to possess multiple skill sets in order to make their creations. I analyzed the threads using a grounded theory approach in which I viewed and compared the data in order to develop codes and “create order” [2]. The resulting coding scheme was recoded and refined allowing the final codes to emerge from the data.

In the discussion that follows, all misspellings, incorrectly used punctuation marks, and grammatical errors in the quotes are captured from the original forum post(s). The names of community members and the name of the community itself, however, are all aliases that I have chosen for the purpose of this paper.

4. Inspiration for Animating

I start my discussion of an online amateur multimedia community and its members by looking at the reasons why the members initially started animating and consequently joined Cold Hotdog. Several posts addressed reasons for creating animations and/or starting to use the Flash software program. Most of these posts came from the “How did you learn Flash?” thread. Cartoons, movies, video games, and content posted in the Cold Hotdog community itself were mentioned in several of the posts, which is similar to some of Freund’s [7] findings in the viding community. For example, one member, P1, tells the story of his/her progression from enjoying the effects in movies as a consumer to becoming a producer:

“I always loved special effects in movies, especially movies like star wars, and also I’ve always loved video games. One day I decided to see if there were any freem game making programs out there so I googled it and found game maker 6. I messed around with it for about 2 years, made several (half completed) games. And then I tried to make a movie with it. I made something, but I don’t know if anyone can call it a movie, but that gave me a thirst to find something that I could make a real movie with. In my searched I stumbled upon this program called flash. [....]"

Here, one can see that P1’s progression to becoming an animator was not uncomplicated. S/he started with a love for already completed games and videos, then
moved to creating his/her own games over the course of several years before moving on to create more complex movies with a more complex software program, which is similar to sequences noted by Ito et al. [8]. Later, in the same post, P1 talks about how some of the community members encouraged him/her to continue working on his/her movies even when his/her movies were criticized by others:

“[…] Eventually I made a movie that I don’t think was too bad for a noob movie, but it was shot down without any positive thing at all said about it by people like P2 and P3. However there were good people on CHD, thanks to P4 I didn’t quit, I kept at it and eventually realized I can import movies into flash and add those special effects I love so much.”

Regardless of the source of inspiration that provided the impetus for one to start animating, this statement demonstrates that even though one may have encountered some discouragement, the community also provided a great motivating factor to help support community members to continue in their craft. This support even helped those who were self-motivated as P1 was in this case.

In addition to other forms of media, another impetus to animate came in the form of other people including friends and family members either via direct entreatments to start creating movies or by example:

“Seven years ago my father walks into my room and says ‘You play too many video games. Make your own’ as he throws a copy of Flash at me.” (P4)

“i started a year and a half ago, a friend of mine gave me a pirated copy, and said she was having trouble working with it, and assumed i would be better at it then she was.” (P5)

“Once when I was over my cousin's house, I was 6 I believe, he was playing around with Flash 4. He let me play around with it, and I had to constantly ask him what button I had to press to make a frame. As far I can remember, my first animation was based on Yatta.” (P6)

“My mom used to do Web Design for a living, she made sites for people and stuff, she had a site that listed popular places for a lot of the states, I think they were mostly called "Aroundwhateverstate.com" […] But she had first given me a side folder that had no links to it on her site for Tucson, and I called it "P7web" because, well, it was P7s Website, and I was 7 and a bit too GENIUS. […] She taught me how to save images on the computer to certain files, and how to make new pages and hyperlinks on my little page. It was really stupid, but there's nothing really good you could expect from a 7 year old who has only just started animation.” (P7)

Here it is evident that some of the people spurring the community members to create animations were animators themselves or at least were familiar with animating. Several of the people mentioned as inspiring others worked specifically in the web design business. However, there were also cases, as in the first two quotes above, in which the sources of inspiration were not themselves animators, yet they believed that the person they were encouraging would be good at or enjoy the craft.

On the whole, several sources of inspiration were cited by the Cold Hotdog community members including existing media, other people (e.g., family members and teachers), and courses taught either at school or at summer camps. These sources are not completely dissimilar to those that one would expect for inspiring skill acquisition in other arenas both formal and informal. However, inspiration and the subsequent methods of skill acquisition do serve an interesting social function for Cold Hotdog community members, which is discussed further in the status markers section of this paper.

Understanding inspiration for accomplishing a task provides more insight into a person’s actions and potentially even his/her goals. Since goals, persistence, and engagement vary in different contexts [1], it is also important to understand not just CHD members and their inspiration sources but the community itself, which is why I now turn to discussing norms in CHD.

5. Social Norms in Cold Hotdog

After being inspired to learn how to create animations, the animators under consideration obviously began participating in the Cold Hotdog community. After joining, or perhaps even before officially joining by signing up and using a community username, the community members were expected to adhere to certain implicit community social norms. Two norms that emerged from the forum data were the use of self-deprecating remarks and the use of sarcasm and humor.

5.1 Self-deprecation

“As far as learning [emphasis in original] to animate, I’m self taught (and not very good yet)” (P8)

“I’ve only finished 2 crappy projects from before I learned about the Stream audio mode.” (P9)
“The game I made is too crappy to put here, but I loved flash after that.” (P10)

“thank you now i am going to try it 😁 im so dum 😒” (P11)

“yeah, i know that these are ubern00bish questions, but I suck at AS. XD” (P12)

As demonstrated in the aforementioned quotes, self-deprecating remarks can be found in various forms throughout the sample of forum threads. Many community members put themselves down in their posts by saying that they are not very good, that their projects are crappy, or that they are not nearly as good as they would like to be. This was quite unexpected. Although several members denoted their desire to get better and to learn more, one would have expected the members to be quite proud of their productions given the amount of time that it takes to produce them. Perhaps this is akin to the contribution assessment concern found by Cook et al. [3]. Members may have been worried that claims that their animations were good would have been met with remarks from other members stating the opposite was true and that their creations were in fact of poor quality. Nevertheless, that kind of reaction was not present in my sample of forum data.

Although it seemed common for members to put themselves down by calling themselves poor animators or by calling their creations crappy, there did seem to be a limitation to the amount of self-deprecation that was considered acceptable. In general, no one replied to the self-deprecating comments that members made about themselves. However, in one instance, P10, a community member with over a thousand posts in the forums, does respond to a self-deprecating comment made by P13 who noted that one of his “crappy cartoons” was on the site.

“One of those crappy cartoons is actually on CHD and I’m very ashamed of it.” (P13)

“could it be the robot christmas one? Seems like it has horrible enough animation for you to be ashamed of it.” (P10)

“Nope, I actually like that one. I’m talking about Big Stupid Bully. I made that if you all didn’t know, and I’m sorry that I did.” (P13)

“should've known. If it was the robot Christmas, you probably wouldn't want to put it into your sig. Yea, I understand about the Bully one.” (P10)

P10 responds by calling an existing cartoon “horrible” and that it is something for which P13 should be ashamed. This kind of response to self-deprecating remarks certainly was not pervasive in my sample of forum threads. In fact, P10 calls one of his games “too crappy to put here” in an earlier post made in the same thread that this exchange took place. No one reprimanded P10 for his response to P13, however. Perhaps the two are quite familiar with one another as both are frequent posters in the forums, and P10 felt comfortable making that kind of statement. Or, perhaps the response was spurred on by the mention of a particular crappy video as opposed to the vague references to crappy work that were made by others. It is not clear why this aberration occurred, for overall, self-deprecation was quite acceptable and prevalent.

Aside from self-deprecating remarks about one’s work, there were also self-deprecating marks made when making requests or asking questions in the forums as seen in P11’s remark noted at the beginning of this section calling him/herself “dum” and in P12’s statement concerning ActionScript. These types of remarks were quite common by newbies/noobs/newbs, which refers to community neophytes [26] who are often deferential or complimentary to higher status participants. Such a finding was also noted in another amateur multimedia community, Animutation Portal [15].

5.2 Sarcasm and humor

In addition to self-deprecation, sarcasm and humor were also prevalent in the Cold Hotdog community. Users often played off one another’s posts:

“I walked from the living room to the kitchen with an unopened copy of Flash on my head. I then knew flash.” (P14)

“true story.” (P15)

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“you mean like the rules thread that nobody reads?” (P16)

“I read it! So… that makes me a nobody… and you know what they say… Nobody's perfect~!” (P17)

Or, they made sarcastic and/or humorous statements within their posts:

“I was genetically engineered to make flash, oh the good old test tube days…” (P18)

“[unlurk] Id like to request a tutorial of some sort dealing with online interactions with flash…. Thanks. [lurk]” (P19)
Members utilized sarcasm and humor in several different types of situations. Some jokes, especially the jokes that played off others’ posts, were the sole impetus for a post. The quote from P15 above is an example of such a case, in which his/her entire post consists of his/her two-word reply to P14. Though any person reading the postings would understand much of the sarcasm and/or humor, some posts required at least a little knowledge of online culture in order to be fully understood. For example, the P19 quote above may not be noteworthy to someone who does not understand what the word “lurk” means. According to the New Hacker’s Dictionary, “lurker” is not a pejorative term but refers to “one who posts occasionally or not at all but is known to read the group’s postings regularly” [26]. With this understanding, the quote takes on a slightly different meaning. Instead of being simply a tutorial request, the lurking terminology paints a picture of someone emerging from perhaps a dark corner into the light or someone poking their head into a room in order to ask for a tutorial before retreating again. This imagery is not necessary to fully understand the request, but it does change the tone of the request.

In other work concerning amateur online videos, jokes were found to help maintain social structures and hierarchical relationships of power [12]. With this in mind, in addition to being humorous, P19 can be seen to be demonstrating at least a passing knowledge of online culture by using the term “lurk.” S/he was also demonstrating that s/he was not a noob but was in fact a member of the community that just happened to not post frequently in the forums.

6. Status Markers in Cold Hotdog

As noted earlier, status serves as a motivator for continued participation in some communities, (e.g., [9,23,31]), so it is important to note how status is signaled and how it functions in CHD. Several status markers were evident in the postings of the CHD forums (in addition to the ranks assigned to and displayed near usernames in the forums). Community members showed their membership in the community and their status through knowledge demonstrations, name-dropping, participation in the forums, and different claims to methods of skill acquisition.

6.1 Knowledge Demonstrations, Name-dropping, and Participation in the forums

Community members tried to show their membership and status in the community through knowledge demonstrations and by mentioning the names of other community members. Higher status in the community was also associated with higher Flash knowledge. To show their knowledge of Flash, community members posted full tutorials, code fragments, or gave suggested improvements to posted code along with explanations for the suggestions, which is similar to the reputation-gaining observed by Oreg and Nov [23]. Several members who used said tutorials, code fragments, or advice in order to learn or improve their content creation process credited the authors of such material:

“Actionscript wise I learned all of I know from P29 and P23.” (P8)

“As for actionscript, I learned some from P23 […]” (P20)

“I learned animation technique from P16 and P4.” (P21)

By mentioning the names of active community members or authors of tutorials on the site, community members were showing that they too were a part of the community and had some of the skills that were necessary in order to be contributing community members. They were also demonstrating a desire to better themselves through the use of such material, which was similar to the self-development drives noted by Oreg and Nov [23] and Lakhani and Wolf [18]. This use of name-dropping, however, was not always successful in demonstrating that one was a member of the community. One member, P9, tried to join the discussion in the “How did you learn Flash?” thread, yet s/he was not received well. His/her post looked quite similar to the posts made by others; s/he stated,

“i learnt it my self on my own , i did some tutorials to make webcam funny things, but most of all the people of chd inspired me, P4, P23, P30(cant remeber the full name) and P31 (again cant spell).”

His/her statement includes the names of some of the same people that are included in the above quotes by P8, P20, and P21, yet s/he was greeted with the retort, “who are you?” by P16, a frequent poster and moderator in the forums. This reaction seems to suggest that one also had to be at least an intermittent poster in the forums in order to be considered a full community member by the forum regulars. The fact that s/he also had trouble both remembering and spelling the names of those whose material s/he had used also signaled infrequent participation in the community. Nevertheless, P9’s demonstration of community membership by the mentioning of others
may have been effective when seen by those who
themselves were neither members of the community
nor frequent posters in the forums.

6.2 Methods of Skill Acquisition

Community members also demonstrated their status
by stating the ways in which they acquired the skills
necessary to create animations. These methods
included the reverse engineering of existing Flash
videos, the use of online tutorials (external to the
community), the use of Cold Hotdog-housed tutorials,
the use of tutorials that came with the Flash software
package, the use of Flash books or other offline
materials, and through courses in school or camps.
Those who learned with little help (e.g., by reverse
engineering existing Flash videos or using tutorials)
were viewed more highly in the community than those
who took courses. In the following quote, P22 extols
his/her ability to learn how to create animations with
Flash with very little help from others:

“I got mine in 4th grade... 8th grade now so... 4
years of animation. I had no help from books,
internet or what so ever, and if i needed help, it
would be for the gamings. I did start out badly,
got the mic last year ago, learn to stream a month
after that and vola, here i am, not the greatest but
creatainly not the worst animator here. i lol to
people who took it for class... Psh, teachers tend
to make bad animation them
selves. 😂” (P22)

P22’s quote is reminiscent of several others in which
members proudly proclaim their skill in learning how
to create animations:

“It’s true, you can learn Flash without
outside/online help!” (P23)

“As far as learning [emphasis in original] to
animate, I’m self taught (and not very good yet)”
(P8)

“I self taught myself on animation, but I used alot
of the tut.s on CHD, mostly P4’s” (P20)

“Most of my actionscripting knowledge I learned
by myself too, but I have read a few things on it.”
(P24)

“I learned flash from one of the most unused yet
underestimated places ever—The Built-In
Tutorials! (insert gasp)” (P21)

Though P22 acknowledges that s/he is “not the
greatest”, s/he still puts down those who learned how
to create animations in a class. S/he even puts
his/herself above teachers who “tend to make bad
animation them selves.” This bravado was quite
different from the self-deprecation that I discussed
earlier in which members downplayed the actual
quality of the productions that they created. Yet the
community members did not see proudly proclaiming
one’s abilities on the one hand while maligning the
fruits of that productivity on the other as contradictory.

Additionally, the concept and importance of being
able to continue to learn things on one’s own also arose
in several posts. These posts occurred in various forms.
One example is from P16 in the thread entitled
“Official Tutorial Request Thread” where s/he
admonishes readers to “Please take 5-10 minutes (if
not more) and search google or some other dedicated
tutorial sites for what you’re looking for.” This is quite
similar to what Cook et al. found in the creative
community where members wanted others to try to
help themselves [3]. In general, community members
seemed willing to help, but those posing questions that
could easily be answered by simply searching other
sites or reading previous posts in threads in the
community were seen as annoyances.

On the other hand, demonstrating that one had tried
to help themselves by searching for a solution before
soliciting help usually garnered helpful responses as
was the case when P33 asked for help with a code
segment that s/he tried to compile in the “Tutorial:
Simple Shooter Game” thread. By showing both the
code s/he had tried and the resulting error message,
s/he demonstrated that s/he at least attempted to find a
solution on his/her own and received a helpful
response. However, P25’s request for a flash preloader
tutorial in the “Official Tutorial Request Thread” was
greeted with a snarky reply given that a potential
solution had been posed immediately before his/her
own request:

“I'm looking for a flash preloader tutorial.” (P25)

“http://www.newgrounds.com/portal/view/440414
Apparently you didn't even read the post above
yours.” (P26)

Perhaps if P25 had demonstrated in some way that s/he
had tried to find tutorials elsewhere or perhaps had
found other tutorials that were unacceptable (including
the tutorial to which the provided link leads), the
request might have been received more amicably. Here
is a more successful request by P32:

“I tried to do a lot of tutorials, but none of them
worked I was working on it for about a week,
trying to do it by myself, and trying tutorials So
my last resort was to talk to a flash pro… please
help me...
This request showed both deference to other members and that P32 understood how important it was to both try to help him/herself and to demonstrate that to the community when posing a question. By framing his/her question in such a way, s/he was not only increasing the odds of a positive and useful response, but s/he was demonstrating that s/he was not a total noob but was in fact an informed member of the community.

Lastly, some Cold Hotdog members desired personal and more structured opportunities to learn. Though being able to learn on one’s own was highly valued in the community, there was also evidence that there were apprentice-mentor type relationships within the community. P27 proudly states in his/her signature that, “I am P28’s newb.” The threads “I seek a worthy Flash apprentice., Enquiry within.” and “Flash Apprentice: Here’s Your Chance, FIRST, YOU MUST PASS THE TEST.” also included solicitations for an apprentice by a potential mentor with several members asking for the opportunity to fill the apprentice role. This type of learning arrangement was similar to the system observed by Steinkuehler [29] and Lindtner et al. [19] in online gaming communities. It is unclear how this type of apprentice-mentor relationship was viewed by the community at large, but the acknowledgement that one was a newb in a signature (as was the case with P27) and the expressed desire to become an apprentice in the aforementioned thread seems to imply that it was not an arrangement of which one should be ashamed.

7. Conclusions and Future Work

Herein I have examined several threads within the Cold Hotdog forums to learn more about the inspirations for animating, social norms, and status markers within the CHD community. My findings show that community members found the inspiration to animate in several different places including teachers, friends, and family members as well as movies, cartoons, and video games. My findings also indicate that CHD members had to acquire both technical and community-related knowledge to participate in the community. Self-deprecation, sarcasm, and humor were all norms within the forums, and new members were exposed when they either broke or failed to recognize and adhere to those norms.

Finally, several status markers emerged including name-dropping, knowledge demonstrations, and participation in the forums. Members also tried to show their status by denoting the ways in which they learned Flash. This ranged from taking a class, which fell near the bottom of the skill acquisition hierarchy, to teaching themselves via the reverse-engineering of existing Flash files on the other end of the hierarchy. In addition to demonstrating status by relaying the way one acquired the technical skills necessary to participate in the community, it was also important to show one’s ability to help oneself or at least one’s attempt(s) to figure out problems individually before soliciting help. Failure to do so exposed one as an outsider or as one with little status in the community. As such, one was unlikely to get expedient or detailed help.

Investigating inspiration and social norms and practices in communities like Cold Hotdog in which informal, mostly unstructured learning takes place amongst people of varying ages can inform the support and development of similar communities. It is understood that individuals desire and need technical skills that are not always addressed in formal, or more specifically, classroom settings [8,10] and that initiative, persistence, and engagement differ depending on the context [1]. So, looking at individuals who are learning in these informal learning spaces and looking at an example of such a community can identify the types of needs that are being met in these communities, areas for improvement, best practices that should be replicated in the development of another community, and instances where learning needs are adequately being met and do not need to be duplicated elsewhere.

It is also important to note that simply wanting to learn a technical skill and finding a community to acquire and improve those skills is not enough to successfully join a community. One must also learn, maintain, and observe the social norms and practices in one’s chosen community. Finding a community focused on one’s interests and learning the desired technical skills is difficult enough, but learning how the community works and gaining acceptance therein is a perhaps unanticipated hurdle. In attempting to create new informal online learning communities, developers and organizers should be careful to pay as much attention to molding and respecting the relationships and interactions therein and to the affordances that support those relationships as they do to focusing on making sure that the right balance of experts and novices on given topics is maintained.

In the future, to further examine these questions of inspiration, socialization, and skill acquisition, I would like to focus on a broader spectrum of posts within the Cold Hotdog forums and include an analysis of the images and videos produced by the community members that are mostly housed in other sections of the community. I would also like to examine posts
comparatively to see whether my existing findings apply to other online multimedia communities.

8. References


