Blogging as a Liminal Space

Research-in-Progress Paper

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ABSTRACT

Liminality is a transitional form of cultural existence in which orthodox customs and societal structures are deferred and replaced with novel ceremonies and rituals that often lack the impression of rigorous permanence. Taking inspiration from the anthropological analyses of Arnold Van Gennep and Victor Turner this paper reflects in a philosophical manner on the metaphor of blogging as a liminal space. Through interpretation of ongoing ethnographic analyses of music blogs the argument is raised that blogging can be viewed as a liminal process for those that actively contribute to these online forums as well as their anonymous readership. Since a liminal space may contain an unstructured social network then blogging could also lead to a credible emergence of the latter.

Keywords

Blogs, Liminality, Social Networking.

INTRODUCTION

In the landscape of modern information systems, the blog as a software artefact affords publishing for the masses (Crystal, 2005) but it does this through an implicit social media framework. One that is seemingly anarchic in structure but fundamentally conducive to the communal exchange of ideas by the collective readership. An online medium effectively created by one initiator as either a personal journal or a link aggregation site can serve as a catalyst in the generation of a more complex social network given an appropriate flow in the traffic of comments posted. This paper offers a philosophical interpretation of the act of blogging itself. The central metaphor to be employed here is that blogging can be interpreted as being a liminal space. Liminality is a concept derived from anthropology and was originally used to denote rituals of transition (Van Gennep, 1909/1960). The metaphor of blogging as a liminal space considers the act as a condition rather than a process that culminates in a role or relationship (Czarniawska and Mazza, 2003): A transitional condition that represents a time and a space.

The discussion that follows will provide a deeper overview of liminality, interpolated with an exposition of why blogging can be construed as a liminal space. This argument will be supported by an example from the blogosphere, namely an ethnographic analysis of a film music blog derived via participant observation. For reasons of anonymity, this blog will not be directly identified. Eclectic tastes in music have been the subject of much discussion in blog communities and audio rarities have been exchanged, much to the consternation of recording companies. What is evident in surveying this film music blog over time is the emergence of a genuine, though ultimately ephemeral, social network defined by idiosyncratic rituals of behaviour. Indeed, the transitory nature of the online community of aliases that was observed is a key characteristic of a liminal space, as will be described in this paper.

LIMINALITY DEFINED

In its original sense, liminality is an anthropological concept used to describe transition rituals within cultures, especially those that ratify a transformation from one social status to another (Van Gennep, 1909/1960, Turner, 1969). These rites of passage can be classified into a three stage process (Turner, 1982). The first is a phase where individuals become detached from their prior social environment, so that they can enter the second phase of transition or liminality. In this stage, participants experience the liminal condition before entering the third and final stage in their rites of passage, this being a reaggregation phase in which membership is attained within a new group or some form of personal transformation has been achieved.

Turner (1967) described liminal states are being havens of pseudo-anonymity where the complex symbolism that often emerges creates a transient environment where a kind of structural invisibility exists. Individuals within such a liminal state

have no marker that can be easily used to ascertain status, ownership of property or kinship rank within the greater community. Devoid of social or economic constraints and unshackled from any hierarchy, identity is in a state of flux for a liminal individual. The upshot of this is a transitional egalitarian environment in the extreme sense.

As a metaphor from which to derive a greater understanding of social phenomena, liminality has been applied to a variety of domains, such as management consulting (Czarniawska and Mazza, 2003), doctoral dissertations (Deegan and Hill, 1991), higher education research (Kiley and Wisker, 2009), computer science education (Eckerdal et al, 2007) and tourism (Lett, 1983). Entities experiencing the liminal condition are in an indeterminate state, according to Turner (1969, p. 95), existing "betwixt and between" the social categories mandated and managed through legal frameworks, local and national customs and other practices regulated by convention or ceremonial systems. Liminality is a culturally salient condition that is either stable or chronic.

Turner (1967) focused on this liminal stage and argued that this period represented the possibility of an unstructured egalitarian social world termed communitas. Communitas derives from Latin and refers to a 'modality of social relationships' rather than 'an area of common living' which is a 'timeless condition'. According to Turner (1967), communitas is characterized (in part) by equality of relations, comradeship that transcends age, rank, kinship etc. and displays an intense community spirit. Thus people from all social groups may form strong bonds, free from structures that normally separate them.

LIMINALITY BINDING THE BLOGOSPHERE

Blogging to some facilitates a democratic form of publishing, one that is within the ambit of anyone that chooses to perform the act. Indeed, some would argue that it represents a paradigm shift tantamount to Gutenberg's invention of the printing press (Crystal, 2005). However, the style of publishing that blogging entails has been described as being of an amateur quality on the whole and an assault on the lofty standards of contemporary culture as a consequence (Keen, 2007). If blogging is a breeding ground for mediocrity to some critics, then grounds exist to classify it as being in a state that is "betwixt and between." The liminal space here is the transition phase between being in the dichotomy that is the world of physical publishing, controlled as it is by corporate entities. In conventional publishing, an author or journalist's manuscript is either accepted or rejected within a structural regime. In the liminal space of blogging, almost anyone can publish their written compositions, regardless of quality, provided they have access to a technological infrastructure. The question is: *Who will read what is posted?*

Turner (1969) indicated that the liminal condition of the transition phase in a rite of passage is one that is situated within a time and space that is sacred in comparison to the more profane nature of the two stages that sandwich it. The sacred is that which is sacrosanct and in the context of blogging is deemed to be that which is special in symbolic meaning, according to our interpretation. The technical constraints of the virtual embodied in the blog medium form their own emergent hallowed platform to which users must conform.

Building upon the work of Van Gennep (1909/1960), Turner (1982) extended the treatment of the liminal condition by viewing the separation phase of the rites of passage as involving a period in which social attributes are turned inside out from a symbolic vantage. Thus, the inhabitants of the liminal condition are ill-defined in their identities. Turner (1982) asserted that even though this may weaken the power base of participants, it has the added advantage of freedom from traditional structural obligations outside of this transition phase. This implies that liminality is a kind of formal anarchy, one that is exemplified by ritual symbols that contain a loss of detail or are redolent with ambiguity and paradox. Within the film music blog that we observed until its demise, the masking of personal identity via avatars or nom-de-plumes was common-place.

In his discussion on "liminal computing," Coyne (2005) commented on gift exchange as something that signifies a threshold event representative of liminality. Participation in the swapping over of gifts is one hallmark of a community, be it of the physical or virtual variety. Indeed, in the film music blogs that we have tracked, such gifts come in the guise of links to rare or obscure motion picture soundtracks that can be downloaded as mp3 (or lossless) files. Though the legality of these gifts may be in question, the motives underpinning such behaviour would appear to be entirely altruistic. The liminal space here is defined by the "sacred" act of file sharing.

A blog is a temporal entity but it is also predisposed to being a temporary one, often conceived through a blend of improvisation and informality. It is the contention of this paper that a blog's transient function as an online journal can possibly place its community of readers within a liminal state. Indeed, this reflective aspect could be one of the motivating factors driving the continuing appeal of blogging as a pastime: The popular weblog can become a primitive though effective mechanism for the gestation of social networks where the shared sense of place gives rise to a virtual assembly bonded by mutual eclectic tastes.

BLOGGING AS A LIMINAL CONDUIT FOR ONLINE DISCUSSIONS ABOUT MUSIC

With the inertia of traditional media hampering more dynamic coverage of changing artistic trends, niche music fans have been flocking to blogs that echo their esoteric interests (Schwartz, 1995). Music blogs typically contain biographical information regarding the artists or their songs, and discussions about their releases. Also present are links to the artist website, their label, similar artists and downloadable sample tracks in mp3 format (Goldstone, 2006). Music blogs differ from peer-to-peer file-sharing services in that they discuss and contain mp3 samples of songs by alternative artist and rare music, and can induce readers to purchase music. While this does not fare well major record companies and certain legal bodies, these blogs can be a useful promotional tool for alternative artist and record labels. In many blogs, the links to mp3 downloads are either sanctioned by the labels and the artists, though bloggers have been known to disable these links upon complaints from these parties.

Chinen (2006) reported that jazz music experienced a resurgence of interest that can be directly attributed to the power of the blogosphere. Ross (2008) offered a similar argument with respect to the classical music genre. As these examples illustrate, Blogs can serve as a novel distribution platform in the digital supply chain for the music industry. Levine et al (1999) and Clemons and Lang (2003) describe interactions between the various players in a digital supply chain, from producers of digitized artistic products to consumers, as "conversations" whereby value propositions are exchanged, thus leading to the establishment of potential long term relationships. A virtual value chain occurs when value-enhancing steps are inculcated through the use of information artefacts (Bockstedt et al, 2005). The information artefacts that constitute Web 2.0 phenomena provide an informal platform for implicit customer relationship management with music blogs being a premiere example in this regard.

With the fading of dominance of record labels as arbiters of the status quo, certain blogs play an increasingly influential role in enabling new artists to be discovered by the public, diminishing the reliance on talent scouts once employed in droves by major companies. Just as no empirical evidence is evident that reviews by music critics directly translate to sales of recorded music, blogs do not necessarily generate direct revenues for artists or labels (Clemons and Lang, 2003) as they do not offer a sales outlet to consumers in the same manner as iTunes, for example. Nevertheless, the process of selection and certification undertaken by blogs adds value by acting as gatekeepers of new music and educating consumers. While many music blogs violate copyright laws if they serve as platforms for the illegal distribution of recorded material in mp3 or lossless formats, it could be argued that this form of trafficking is the lesser of two evils. Common sense would suggest that to be relegated to obscurity is a cardinal sin that every musician would avoid at all costs. The sharing of music via blogs when coupled with associated critical discourse on content could be construed as one example of an effective guerrilla marketing strategy (Levinson and Gibson, 2010), albeit one that is enacted by the music's fanbase. (Incidentally, the word "guerrilla" is an original referent to "irregular warfare" which one could view as a kind of liminal militaristic ideology due to its characteristic of not conforming to established rules.) Music bloggers are consumers of the art-form themselves with their passion capable of infecting a readership community to become a shared affliction that is a welcome state of being (Dewan and Ramprasad, 2009).

COMMENTS ON A NARRATIVE-ORIENTED METHODOLOGY

Avison and Myers (1995) served as partial inspiration in adopting participant observation as the research methodology in our ongoing study of the music blogosphere. The latter paper considered the potential role of anthropology as a source discipline for information systems. In contrast, writing from the perspective of an anthropologist, Reed (2008) documented how a group of London bloggers made sense of their city in a paper devoid of methodological jargon but rich with narrative depiction. This is the style that we wished to adopt in the delineation of our research. A similar descriptive approach was also espoused by Czarniawska and Mazza (2003) in their account of "consulting as a liminal space." The latter research employed participant observation and used liminality as a metaphor to inform the temporary nature of the rites and rituals of consultants whose activities required the suspension of normal corporate practice and order.

Participant observation is a technique widely used in cultural anthropology and its implementation enables one to acquire an informal awareness of a selected community of individuals and their behavioural customs through rigorous association with members in their natural habitat, typically over an extended observation interlude (DeWalt et al, 1998; Douglas, 1976). For example, Fox (2004) provides a popular exposition of participant observation in her monograph, "Watching the English." The title of the latter says it all as it offers an anthropological analysis of English culture that uncovers complex sets of unspoken rules and bizarre codes of behaviour amongst members of British society.

The "natural environments" subject to scrutiny in our research are music blogs, which are in fact artificial habitats comprised of text composed by their members. Conversations from the living text that structure a sustainable blog and the interpretation of the latter is an observation of the participants that make up the community. Indeed, if a sense of community can be

observed within the communicative transactions of a blog then what is being witnessed is a kind of automatic narrative ethnography (Tedlock, 1991). The researcher is a fly-on-a-wall noting online behavioural customs as manifested in the dynamic text of the blog. The goal of participant observation is to enable the research worker to gather data within the empirical context of the symbols and experiential nature of the respondents of the study in question (Vidich, 1955). The respondents of our ongoing study are those blog participants who provide information via posts and comments, according to whatever emergent styles or codes-of-conduct are present in that particular text-based environment.

What shall be featured and commented on in this paper, due to the limitation of word count, is a short narrative depiction of a film music blog which was gleaned via participant observation. Out of respect to the privacy of the individuals involved, due care has been taken to protect the anonymity of the blog participants that have been subjected to our scrutiny.

WATCHING THE RITUALS OF A FILM MUSIC BLOG

Varese Sarabande is the leading US recording label for film music compositions. In a 2007 interview, appearing in Film Music Weekly (Carlsson, 2007), the company's executive producer Robert Townson, was outraged at the negative business impact of film music blogs which were thriving at the time. Townson commented that the sharing of commercially-available soundtracks through blogs using free file hosting services (such as the now defunct Megaupload) was clearly an illegal activity that could also affect the future release of niche-market scores. Some bloggers argued that the free exchange of bootlegs and promotional CD content online promotes the work of the artist to a greater audience but Townson countered with the remark that this practice could actually negate the eventual legitimate release of such product in a more high-quality format. Film music bloggers as a group were accorded a kind of outlaw status, albeit possessed with an eccentric aesthetic sense in that artistic content appeared to be more important to these aficionados than technical quality of sound reproduction. Their common bond as brigands made them hide behind online nom de plumes and in so doing entered a liminal state.

Film Music Blog X was observed from May 2007 until its demise in July 2010. Its home-grown authenticity as a haven for amateur devotees of film music was reflected in its unpolished and obliquely titled URL with a "blogspot.com" suffix. Due to its popularity, the blog was subdivided into sections: General, Science-Fiction, European, American Western, Asian, Computer Game Scores and the Golden Age of Hollywood. There were also sections that were only related to film music in a tangential sense, namely Jazz, Classical Music and Vinyl (the latter being a forum for the exchange of LP-record albums converted to mp3 file format.) One individual was the moderator of Film Music Blog X and his duties included categorization of contents on a monthly basis. The blog moderator also was the driving force behind monthly projects within the community soliciting compilations of specific aspects of film music (e.g. a collection of the best score-only tracks from "James Bond" films). However, the blog moderator was never the focus of proceedings. The society of comments was all that was important and its members held the blog moderator in high regard for his friendship, perceived wisdom and his role as the founding father of the community. Being free from any password protection, casual visitors often discovered this open blog by accident and, once immersed in the online congeniality that emerged, were sometimes seduced into becoming contributing members.

Each month there were passionate though succinct discussions on eclectic aspects of film music soundtracks and related topics, but the chief function of Film Music Blog X was to act as a communal stage for the exchange of out-of-print and promotional soundtrack albums (with some exceptions as will be noted.) Members identified themselves via aliases with true identities being hidden. Hints sometimes became apparent as to the ethnic background of participants but the primary attribute evident was a shared passion for film music as a community of interest. While tracking the discourse on Film Music Blog X other more personal narratives arose, such as the blog moderator's domestic accommodation woes: To prevent the looming threat of eviction from his dwellings, the moderator sought online donations via micro-payments from the blog community. This cry for help was met with several postings of genuine concern and support as well as financial offerings. Members of the Film Music Blog X "family" also revealed quite serious health issues affecting their lives and obtained words of support from others. Other members talked about the death of loved ones and were in turn comforted by postings of condolences.

Film Music Blog X maintained an ad-hoc code ethics over its history with one key principle being that only out-of-print soundtracks could be shared. Comments were made championing the rights of independent film music soundtrack labels such as Intrada and Film Score Monthly. Their esteem in the blog community manifested itself by no public sharing of currently available products. Exceptions were made to this improvised rule over time, such as the "Saturday Night Special." The latter custom referred to a weekend-long window in which the unofficial code of ethics was suspended and members were permitted to share currently available film music soundtracks. In retrospect, this breach of community protocol was possibly the cause of the blog's demise.

Regardless of the ethical hypocrisy described above, it must be emphasized that Film Music Blog X was not merely an online conduit for free soundtracks. The illicit trafficking of film music during the blog's existence was embedded in critical dialogue that both informed and educated the niche community with laconic style. The back catalogues of film music composers consigned to oblivion, sentenced unjustly to cultural insignificance, were brought to the attention of new audiences in this forum. Even loyal supporters of mainstream film music discovered something of worth in the pages of this blog which they would have been oblivious to otherwise. One example of this was the American film composer Mort Garson, whose death in 2007 provoked the Film Music Blog X moderator to create a special memorial section where samples of his work were available for download.

News of the closure of Film Music Blog X in July 2010 precipitated an extended period of mourning. A selection of memoriam posts are featured below to provide a partial illustration of the depth of feeling evoked by this blog whose impending cessation made its inherent transient nature apparent to all:

"Even if I just contributed the smallest amount to this great family here, it was a really fantastic experience and a wonderful place to meet fine people and their love for films and film music. I really learned a lot about new scores and composers, which I deeply thank you all for! Sorry to see this place to be shut down! Hope to see you at other places in the blogosphere!"

"My "Happy Place" is going away, and that puts me in a very sad place. Hope you, the kitties, the dog, and roomies enjoy your "copious" free time hereafter. We'll all miss you, and each other. Thanks for this glorious obsession."

"As you know, I have never really been a soundtrack collector - not in the way you folks are, anyway. But even so, this place is close to my heart and it's spirit of fun, friendship and sharing will never be forgotten, not by me and I am sure, not by all of us. Ave atque vale."

The last sentence (in Latin) in the previous blog transcript is an acutely poignant metric of the sense of loss experienced by this transient community of film music "geeks". This is one of the most remembered lines from Roman poet Catullus and roughly translates to "*Hail and farewell*" or "*I salute you…and goodbye.*" In the hearts and minds of the Film Music Blog X regulars it was probably always apparent that their shared experience as a community was to be transient in nature as a liminal space. The identities that they possessed were hidden behind the communal equality that was their passion for their little known hobby. The irony is that film music as an art-form is in a kind of perpetual liminal state being "*betwixt and between*" classical and popular genres and highly utilitarian in original purpose.

CONCLUSION

The ongoing scrutiny of Film Music Blog X has revealed that music bloggers appear to be motivated by their enthusiasm for the music or composer, rather than personal financial gains. While they may violate established copyright laws in their sharing of film music, they do so as a reaction to the marginalization of the art form that they love. In bonding as an online community of interest through this blog they promote film composers, past and present, and act as amateur archivists in the process.

Current scholarship into the enigmatic origins of the music instinct within humanity speculates that it evolved in part as a pre-linguistic catalyst to foster communal bonding (Levitin, 2006; Ball, 2010). In her exposition on the current renaissance of the analogue LP record, Dell (2008) observed that part of its appeal as a musical artefact is the social experience factor: Congregating around a record player is a physical act conducive to discussion about the shared listening event. Live concerts of all musical genres evoke a similar collective passion channelled towards a directed interest. In this age of distributed social media, the aural emotions of music are reflected more and more in text rather than through verbal exchanges. Music blogs are one social platform for this appreciative expression.

How does one quantify a level of community, though, without denigrating in the process the intangible nature of the emotional connections that allow it to exist? Ultimately, a community, especially one that is in a liminal state, is easy to recognize but hard to define. Aesthetic perception, as in the case of music, is an ability that is at once individual and common. In the case of Film Music Blog X, the comments initially directed to its author evolved over time to become an animated conversation of the collective. These were no longer mere reactionary postings from disparate individuals but were instead signifiers of belonging to a liminal space that for a short duration was a virtual home for those with a mutual interest.

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