Music as Cultural Glue:
Supporting Bands and Fans on MySpace

Irina Shklovski
Carnegie Mellon University
irinas@cs.cmu.edu

danah boyd
University of California-Berkeley
dmb@sims.berkeley.edu

ABSTRACT

The roots of MySpace.com are deeply entwined with music culture. By explicitly engaging musicians in the design process, MySpace has allowed musicians to create a digital identity and connect with fellow musicians and fans. This paper explores how MySpace designed for bands, the supportive community that musicians were able to create for themselves, the symbiotic relationship between musicians and fans, how music serves as cultural glue, and how designers can learn from MySpace's decisions.

Author Keywords

MySpace, music, community, fans, social network sites

INTRODUCTION

In May 2006 Jupiter Research released a report which announced that a social network site MySpace generates more community-related music activity than any other music-related site [5]. In effect, they announced that people discover music more on MySpace than anywhere else. Academic researchers have explored how people, especially youth, use MySpace for articulation of social networks and identity production [3, 4]. Yet, little attention has been paid to the personal, professional, or promotional uses of these technologies by the second largest population of MySpace: independent, aspiring, and professional musicians. In this paper, we explore the relationship between the site creators and the music community as a basis for understanding how a social network site emerged as a major force in the music industry. In particular, we emphasize how form can often follow far behind function [11], when function is designed in close collaboration with the users.

BACKGROUND

In early 2003, Friendster emerged as a prominent social network site[1]. Friendster was originally designed as a dating site, and did not welcome non-personal profiles. They deleted thousands of other profiles [2] including profiles that represented bands. This barred musicians from using the service as a way to connect with their fans. Music

This article is an unpublished Tech Report.

flavored MySpace from its conception. One of MySpace founders, Tom Anderson, known as simply Tom to most MySpace subscribers, had been in numerous rock bands since his teenage years. One of Anderson's early strategies was to welcome populations that had been kicked off Friendster. He intentionally provided a space for musicians that were seeking a way to directly connect with their fans and promote themselves.

MySpace was launched from Santa Monica, California in fall of 2003. Los Angeles hipsters immediately adopted it. Indie rock bands were central to this community and bands that were deleted by Friendster found a safe haven on MySpace. Band managers, club promoters, and independent musicians leveraged the site to promote local bands and provide VIP access to a handful of premier clubs.

When Anderson realized that musicians were joining the site, he contacted them to ask what he could do to support them. MP3.com had just closed its doors and emergent bands were desperate to have a space to promote their music and gigs. In early 2004, MySpace launched music profiles based on the feedback they received. These profiles were quite similar to traditional social network site profiles [2], providing room for a self-description, a list of "friends" (used by bands to collect fans and fellow musicians), and a comments section where fans could post messages for everyone else to see. However, three significant features differentiated the music profile: a separate listing, a calendar of gigs, and a mode of music distribution. Music profiles are listed separately on MySpace, allowing users to search for bands directly. The calendar lets bands share when they will be performing where, but it is the music distribution feature that helped make MySpace a major force in the music community.

Having learned from mistakes made by MP3.com's such as it's reliance on downloading apps and windows media, MySpace built a Flash player that allowed all users to stream music directly from the profile page. Musicians could upload up to four songs and make these songs available for download or streaming within the site. Months later, MySpace began allowing non-music users to choose songs from bands' profiles to stream on their profiles. This feature, which by default auto-plays a user's chosen song, is controversial because it presents a usability nightmare.

Despite features geared specifically towards musicians, MySpace was not commonly perceived as a music site until

September 2004, when R.E.M. unveiled their new album on the site. Fans could login to the site and listen to the full album weeks before it was released. This solidified MySpaces' reputation as something other than a dating site. This perception drew in those who were dissatisfied with Friendsters' focus on dating. The explicit focus on music also helped attract teenagers, a population who had "missed" Friendster.

In the course of the last two years, MySpaces' membership rolls swelled making it the most popular site on the Internet. However, the site continued to focus its development and its business model on musicians. In March 2005, MySpace offering simple username-based URLs to help bands advertise their profiles (e.g. http://www.myspace.com/tom). MySpace also created its own label, put out a compilation CD in November 2005, and started a MySpace tour with various bands. When News Corp. purchased MySpace in July 2005, MySpace was touted as both a place for friends and a place for music. While the early music adopters on MySpace were primarily 'indie' bands, the acquisition introduced musicians from many other genres to the site.

In May 2006, Billy Bragg began protesting the site over wording in the Terms of Service that provided MySpace with exclusive rights over any content uploaded to the site. In a matter of weeks, MySpace changed their TOS to clarify that their rights were nonexclusive. While this situation initially outraged musicians, MySpace's rapid response helped solidify the sentiment that MySpace was listening to bands.

The popularity of MySpace inevitably generated urban myths about its usefulness to upstart musicians. When a UK band Arctic Monkeys topped the charts in October 2005, MySpace was given credit for their success. However, when interviewed, the band said, *"[When we went number one in England] we were on the news and radio about how Myspace has helped us. But that's just the perfect example of someone who doesn't know what the fuck they're talking about. We actually had no idea what [MySpace] was."* [10] Despite the explicit denial of MySpaces' role helping the band, musicians continued to join. As of September 2006, there are over 175,000 registered bands on MySpace.

METHODOLOGY
In order to understand dynamics of MySpace, we used several methodologies: ethnography, semi-structured interviews, informal interviews, and historical analysis. The first author conducted a broad ethnography of MySpace over 18 months. The second author conducted informal interviews with MySpace musicians. We then conducted informal interviews with MySpace staff and did a historical analysis of news articles and online discussions concerning MySpace.

A COMMUNITY OF MUSICIANS
Connections articulated on social network sites often begin as reflections of already existing communities [2]. Many of the musicians indicate in their blogs that decisions to join MySpace came as recommendations from friends or other musicians. *"a friend of mine got fired up about myspace-how despite it being so big and popular, it was still so so happening. she didnt want to be left behind. and neither do i."* While some joined because they found their friends were on the system, others made an effort to bring their friends to the system. Articulating pre-existing relationships is also a way for musicians already established on MySpace to help new joiners to get exposure by posting bulletins to their fans with encouragements to check out the new band on MySpace. Not only can such actions serve as promotion techniques, they are also confirmations of friendship and solidarity, which provide additional levels of connection for an existing community.

Prior research on social uses of the Internet has shown that people often develop friendships and personal relationships online with people that share their beliefs, interests and values [9]. Thus it is not surprising that many musicians praise MySpace as a great way to find other musicians with similar interests. Finding others with similar interests can spur on collaboration that is often advertised on artists' profiles: *"Richard wants this next CD to be the best he's ever done. Early reviews of demos in progress seem to bear this out. He'll be working with singers he's met on myspace as well as some other well known artists in the business"* and discussed in their blogs: "*We are playing with John from the Hereafter, we met on MYSPACE and he is great, touring from California around the great Pacific NW!*" For those who feel isolated, finding others interested in the same art form could be beneficial to their sense of belonging despite the digital and distant nature of these ties [1, 8]: "*Myspace is great, particularly for marginal styles of music, and people who are living in relative musical isolation*" (CITE)

MySpace supports formation of supportive communities of both of musicians who've known each other prior to joining and those that meet based on similar musical interests. These communities also support some of the less known independent bands in helping them set up gigs and performances when they are on tour. While for some these kinds of opportunities remain as potential, for others, scheduling tours through MySpace is a comfortable reality of reciprocity:

"*The way that we tour is we go on MySpace, find a band we think is interesting, and ask them where they play."(CITE)*

"Thanks for sharing the stage with us at the Old Towne pub. The pleasure was ours! Can't wait to see you cats again on your home turf." (a comment left by another band on a musician's MySpace page).

These opportunities have enabled a wider variety of independent bands to go on tours around the country, giving non-mainstream upstart musicians a chance to showcase themselves in new environments and to gain valuable

exposure and experience they otherwise would not have been able to obtain.

RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN BANDS AND FANS

Perhaps the most obvious function of MySpace for musicians is the ability to connect with fans. As one musician expressed on his blog: *"We are on line and rockin' the myspace! We don't just want customers. We want a family."* What makes MySpace unique is that musicians can both broadcast announcements about upcoming gigs and CD releases and engage directly and personally with their fans using the same medium. Musicians can post announcements on their profile or broadcast to all their fans through the bulletin board feature. Direct engagement happens as musicians answer personal messages from their fans using the internal messaging system, as they add new fans to their network. This adding however, is often a very personal process that musicians take pains to communicate to their fans in their blogs: *"i am entering a new phase of myspace commitment ... it's just that i need to keep nurturing my individual connections. i have been trolling around here and inviting new friends left and right. yes, it was really me who added you. and when i get time, i am doing my best to answer your emails"*. Most fans search for their favorite bands and friend them, but smaller bands often reach out to MySpace users who have similar musical tastes to the influencers of that band.

Many musicians, especially those that are just starting out explicitly indicate in their blogs that the experience of fans finding their profiles, contacting them and coming to shows is extremely gratifying:

"I REALLY, REALLY, REALLY appreciate all of your support, and thanks so much for the countless emails, myspace messages, posts and comments"

"Thank you so much for caring and listening and discussing and waiting and coming to the shows. I really love the community that we have created for each other and I hope that it continues to grow in a positive, natural way"

Moreover many musicians also comment on immense love and support they receive from their fans on MySpace. As one New Orleans musician expressed on her blog after Hurricane Katrina: *"The concern, unbelievable generosity and determination to help out my small brood and me has been nothing short of mindboggling."*

This kind of frank communication and exchange promote a sense of equality or egalitarianism between musicians and their fans unlike any other forum. Like most other social network sites, MySpace does not differentiate between different types of connections [6]. While this "feature" is often problematic [3], it serves an important function in defining the relationship between musicians and their fans. Visually, there is no difference between a connection to another musician or to a fan. So fans can often find themselves keeping company with celebrities on musician's friend lists. This "leveling" of the playing field often encourages fans to comment on their idol's new music, leave testimonials and even send private messages. In effect, MySpace successfully removes constraints on potential communication between musicians and their fans, making it all "just a click away."

Bands and fans successfully developed a symbiotic relationship where bands are able to "collect" fans, thus increasing the reach of their self-promotional activities, and fans use their connection to bands as part of their identity performance. When fans "friend" bands, they want to publicly display their fandom, receive a band's updates, and ideally, encourage the band to validate their expression of appreciation and support through a comment. By explicitly featuring connection to their favorite bands, fans use music to express who they are[7]. As part of this self-presentation, fans often select their favorite, sometimes obscure songs to stream from their profiles. This is probably one of the most effective ways to encourage friends to discover new music and the reason why Jupiter Research put MySpace at the top of their list of influential music sites [5]. By providing fans and musicians with novel ways to interact, MySpace has rapidly become an institution for American bands.

FORM LAGGING BEHIND FUNCTION

Despite its usefulness and functionality, the technology of MySpace is generally considered to be a disaster in design and usability[11]. Though musicians profess appreciation of the opportunities the site offers, many also acknowledged problems with using the site and rant about them on their blogs: *"I am retarded I think, cause I don't know how to put my own music on that thing-- oh well! Maybe someone here can help!"* Despite its obvious success, MySpace has not sufficiently addressed usability issues. Many of its users or potential members are confused by an awkward interface and reliance on third-party software solutions for many aspects of profile personalization. Worse, because musicians tend to be known public figures they are easy to and often are impersonated on the site as one musician discusses on his blog: "there are fakers, and impersonators out there, using myspace for devious reasons…" Although MySpace has policies in place to deal with such contingencies, the fact that impersonations happen makes it more difficult for musicians to establish their authenticity for their fans.

Yet, none of these problems seem to deter millions of users from visiting the site daily to hang out, listen to music from favorite musicians, search for new music or interesting writing, and engage with each other.

LESSONS FROM MYSPACE

Successfully supporting social interaction is one of the more challenging problems for technology developers and designers. More and more applications now include a social network component, acknowledging that supporting personal connections is a powerful way to engage users. The research presented in this paper illustrates how it is

possible to build a system that can support a specific kind of social milieu. MySpace is very successful in providing functionality to support independent musicians in creating their own communities and connecting with their fans. This success was not accidental, but rather a result of MySpace's developers deliberately reaching out to musicians and listening to their needs and desires.

In order for the system to work, it had to attract both musicians *and* their fans. By creating features that supported teens and 20/30-somethings, MySpace captured key fan populations and their friends. A recent moral panic concerning teens' activity on the site [4] has put this dynamic at risk, revealing the challenges in designing a site that supports different populations who may not be perceived to benefit from easy access to each other.

Amidst MySpace's successes and failures in supporting music, there are invaluable lessons that designers can learn:

- Music is cultural glue. Through music, people can express who they are and connect with like-minded souls. This glue helps tie together a growing 100+ million user social network site.

- Design that supports symbiotic relationships, such as that between musicians and their fans, benefits both groups. Providing mechanisms for mutual admiration and validation is a key to facilitating this symbiosis.

- Blogs and homepages allow anyone to broadcast to the world, but this does not mean that anyone is listening. To support the broadcasters, it is also imperative to engage the listeners.

- Designing for relevant social groups requires actively engaging with and learning from them throughout the design and deployment of a site. It is critical to both listen *and* show that you are listening.

- Most surprisingly, however, MySpace demonstrates that usability is relatively unimportant compared to meeting the social and interaction needs of a population and being prepared to apologize for making mistakes.

CONCLUSION
Human beings have been creating music for as long as they have been able to make noise and produce rhythm. Music is a form of cultural glue that connects people. Fashion, subcultures, and nightlife all emerge through music. Music is a vehicle for self-expression and discovery. MySpace has created an environment that supports consumption and production of music while providing for the communities that exist around music. Despite its shortcomings, MySpace is an excellent case study for designers that wish to understand the role of technology in people's lives.

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