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Digital Thunderdome:
Performing Identity and Creating Community in a Facebook World

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Abstract: This essay presents an online community in the context of the larger performance of digital identity that has become somewhat common in recent years. Through applying folkloristic methodologies, the paper examines the creation and evolution of a new community that pushes traditional understandings of how folk groups are conceptualized and analyzed. As shown here, the digital community exists in a hybridized and fractured limbo, yet is still bound by the premodern rules of folkloric boundaries that folklorists have studied and identified for generations.

A few hours after the work day has ended a group of men and women sit down to discuss the day's news. The conversation rotates between politics, sports, economic philosophy, kids, and even science fiction television shows. The liquor flows heavily for some and the effects become apparent when one man begins to reminisce about his favorite genre of music: '80s electro-pop. The conversation turns back to politics and the upcoming presidential election. The liberals, a numerical minority, try in vain to persuade their conservative compatriots that President Obama deserves re-election, or at the very least, does not deserve to lose to Mitt Romney. The seal is broken with the first "racist!" declaration. On cue, the others echo the call until the earnest liberals relent and join the pack, muttering "racist" themselves. The ensuing silence is broken when a man bursts into the refrain from A-ha's 1984 hit song, "Take On Me."

This scene could be played out anywhere in the world, and with a few minor tweaks in names and references, in any era. In 2012 America, however, this entire interaction happened online between a group of people that span multiple time

zones and two coasts; most of whom have never met in "real life." The place referred to as "Thunderdome" exists as a "secret" Facebook group. Despite the apparent restrictions of an online format, the group can and does interact in meaningful ways. The jokes are understood, the personalities are well-known, and the topics produce a barrage of fiery opinions. The community acts as a sort of idealized bar, where friends go daily to let off steam and yell at each other with no consequences. Through continued contact and interaction, behaviors become normalized, relationships formed, and trust developed. After a short time, they transcend the "online" prefix and simply become a community.

As a member of this group since its inception, I am not only familiar with its rituals and customs, but I have helped create and enforce those traditions. In that respect, I am not an objective observer. Rather, using my perspective as a participant observer, I will attempt to relay the nature of the group itself, the performance and behavior of its members, and the symbolism of its rituals. Through personal knowledge, online records and discussions, and interviews with other members, I analyze the role and importance of the forum in general, and its place within the evolution of what can be considered "identity" and "community" in a shifting technological landscape that blends the "real" with the "virtual," the physical with the imagined.[1]

The Construction of Identity

The advent of "social networking" has allowed for the creation of a new form of interpersonal interaction and relationships. This hybridized performative identity manipulates formal and informal processes to create a standardized virtual method of presenting yourself to the world. This method of performance in an online environments relies on not only what the social scientist danah boyd notes is a cognizant "negotiation of social boundaries" (2007, 135), but also reimagines the role of informal and vernacular social relationships. In the online environment, folkloric processes are not only linguistic and performative, but reflect and distort

"real world" social behaviors. The very word "friend" has been reimagined and given new connotations. Online platforms like Facebook have turned the word from a noun to a verb, a significant shift stripping it of previous social obligations and emotional attachments. As boyd noted, paradoxically, this action in effect flattens the depth of online relationships (2007, 134). On Facebook, like other social networks, there is no nuance or separate gradations of "friendship." Both intimate relationships and casual acquaintances are subject to the same category and the same binary distance. Whereas an offline *friend* is someone with whom you have a relationship developed and enhanced by emotional attachment, to *friend* someone online is to simply allow them access into your online social sphere. The online friendship then becomes an extension of the identity being portrayed and gives depth to the social sphere, if not the relationship between the individuals themselves.

At the heart of that social sphere is a person's online identity. In his seminal work *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life*, Erving Goffman saw personal interactions in terms of a theatrical routine with actors performing a scene upon a constructed stage (1956). He saw how people intentionally controlled the scene and stage through verbal and non-verbal communication. Interpersonal relationships were created and maintained through conscious efforts by both actor and audience to read context and history into each scene. To Goffman, an identity was a mask, the deliberate summation of characteristics a person performed in front of a particular audience.

The construction of an online identity is perhaps an even more blatant adherence to Goffman's interpretation of performance. With Facebook specifically, the user is *given* control to create and modify key aspects of his or her presentation. A user works within the parameters that Facebook—or any other social networking tool—has erected for them; the illusion of control and choice. As Goffman noted that the individual presents their identity as an active and passive negotiation of their surroundings, an online performance simply replaces physical parameters for

virtual and networked ones. An obvious appeal of Facebook, and other social networking sites, is the ability to transcend these physical boundaries and connect people across the world. To this end, users are encouraged to be as honest about themselves as possible. In fact, in their "Community Standards," Facebook explicitly bans "[c]laiming to be another person, creating a false presence for an organization, or creating multiple accounts."[2] Presenting the "real" self is literally mandated. How someone presents their "real" self, though, allows the user the power to create and project their identities.

The key aspect of control to Goffman was the idea that the actor created the scene by setting the stage on which the performance was presented. To facilitate this, Facebook allows for a litany of customizable features through which to express an identity including: a profile picture, job title, education level, residency information, relationship status, religious views, political views, favorite quotations, and even a free-form "About You" section where a user can espouse any other thoughts that might not fit into these pre-defined categories. Compared to other online environments where the username becomes central to the identity, on Facebook, the profile and to a greater extent the profile picture receives the focus as the visual component directly tied to the name. On Facebook, your "face" is represented by the combination of these descriptions and images.

The additional primary identification device is the "Like" section. Facebook members can "Like" businesses, entertainers, movies, musicians, television shows, politicians; anything with a Facebook presence. Users themselves can create pages, making the "Like" system an interactive participation. In an almost inverse relationship to the "friend" feature, the "Like" category takes a verb and makes it a noun. Pictures of the "liked" people, places, and businesses are shown on the user's page with the effect of adding depth to the profile and to help shape the identity of the person "behind" the profile.

The effort by Facebook to merge the online and offline selves pre-supposed a "splintered cogito." Erik Davis suggested that the digital world demanded this

fragmentation, that the mind and the body were necessarily separated. We enable this by making our split consciousness self-aware. Or as Davis put it, "we lend 'reality' to stray fragments of the psyche by externalizing them into a field of technologically sustained symbolic intersubjectivity" (2004, 25). Facebook's features very clearly attempt to reconcile that, however. The way Facebook directs its users through the process of constructing an identity, the avatar and the body are reflections of each other; the profile enables the user to allow the body to be projected with as little disruption or distortion as is reasonable.

By providing a multitude of ways in which the user can customize and personalize, Facebook does two things. First, it gives the user a sense of pseudo-individuality. The philosopher Theodor Adorno looked at this type of standardization in popular music (2009 [1941]). He found that by giving the impression of freedom and improvisation, both artist and audience were empowered with the mental comfort to feel in control. But in truth, the artists were reinforcing the structural components by allowing improvisation to become a part of the standardization. Through repetition of form, if not style, the audience was instructed how to perceive these songs. As he noted: "Improvisations—passages where spontaneous action of individuals is permitted—are confined within the walls of the harmonic and metric scheme" (2009, 69). This power arrangement is found in Facebook's setup. In effect, Facebook has given their users the same stage on which to perform. How individuals modify and customize that stage, and how they act on that stage give the audience the clues by which to interpret and understand the performance. But those customizations reinforce the structure. Given Facebook's popularity and global connectivity, the audience has become experienced with how to interpret those pseudo-individualistic choices. The Facebook performer is also a Facebook reader and understands how his or her presentation choices will be received and understood. An informal, folkloric feedback loop is established: a user reads identity in the profile of others and then

projects his or her own desires of how he or she wants their profile to be read by configuring the sections of the profile in a measured manner.

The second major effect of Facebook's deliberate attempt to merge an individual's online and offline self can be found in the profile picture. Although only one of a variety of ways to customize one's presentation, the profile picture is the central focus due to its institutional prominence. Due to Facebook's rules regarding honest names, the picture gains more significance and importance and adds a second dimension to the name itself. Users may upload whatever profile picture they wish, although copyrighted images are discouraged.[3] The combination of name and picture give the online personage a grounding in reality as we perceive identity through both text and visual means. Simply put, a person in "real life" has both a name and a face and body. As the digital representation of the identity, the picture is the "head" of the user's name and the profile's "body." A peculiar reciprocal of this is the increasing tendency to perform in "real life" with the expressed purpose of sharing that experience through online mediators like Facebook. I, myself, have taken or posed for photos with the intent of making them my profile picture or posting them to Facebook. In those moments, I am consciously manipulating my "real life" experience in order to satisfy my virtual life. In each of these ways, through pseudo-individualization and the merging of the textual with the visual, Facebook attempts to restructure the cogito splintered by the digital environment by removing boundaries.

The user experience does not end with the profile, however. The transition from an amalgam of online personalities into an online community has been one of Facebook's most enduring effects. Digital communities can exist in multiple ways and through various types of platforms, but by embracing the construction of authentic identities (or at least the illusion of authentic), Facebook enables its users to take "real life" relationships and act them out online. They want to embrace individuality in their users' profiles. When Facebook users accept this new reality that online profiles are not merely avatars or reflections, but actual extensions of

their identity, the obstacles in place to hinder creating a community are demolished. To illustrate this point, I will turn to a group that has set itself apart from the larger Facebook world in various ways, erecting both institutional and folkloric boundaries to differentiate itself from the larger online environment.

The Construction of Community

Facebook "groups" are controlled spaces where users can mold the interactivity of Facebook to their own wishes. In the case of "Thunderdome" there are some very real institutional limits in place. It is a "secret" group, which means that outside members cannot see the group exists, who is in it, or what is posted. This boundary of choice allows members of the Thunderdome community solace and a certain level of social protection. Ostensibly, Thunderdome is a political debate forum. In practice, discussions roam the gamut from topical politics to television shows to sexual behaviors and everything in between. The setup facilitates conversations being side-tracked easily, transforming a discussion thread at any moment. In many ways, these conversations mimic face-to-face interactions, often succumbing to the will of the "loudest" voice with little interference or "official" censoring. Due to the unpredictability of the vernacular direction of the dialogue, members cite the institutional wall of secrecy as a necessary component to both the group's success and continued existence. When asked, most respondents saw the benefits of this as absolute. The group creator explained the decision thusly: "I thought it best to go to the full 'secret' level to preserve the anonymity of members posting in order to promote more open engagement." The other administrator echoed this sentiment: "Being secret…allows for uninhibited discussions, especially considering the nature of many members' professions." Indeed, the occupational lives of many participants make anonymity a necessity. The group has scores of lawyers and government officials of varying levels, many of whom are not allowed to comment publicly on the topics discussed within the

group. A lawyer confirmed this point succinctly by saying: "I would leave the group and delete my previous posts if it was not secret."

Because of these restrictions, new members have to be specifically invited to join by someone already within the group. Functionally, this gives it a certain exclusivity and reinforces the belief that the group is somehow special. Practically, this keeps the membership grounded in "real life." Thunderdome fluctuates around eighty-five members, all of whom have a pre-established relationship with at least one other person. The dynamics of the group are saturated in context. Perhaps the biggest risk with engaging in online communication is the lack of inflection. Language is defined by more than just the words, but also by tone and nuance. A new member may completely misinterpret the meaning of a post and alienate him or herself by responding inappropriately. As such, a sponsoring member is instructed to make an introductory thread providing a brief background of the person, their profession, interests, politics, geographic location, etc. The new member "initiation" might be the closest Thunderdome has to a ritual performance. In response, members are usually welcoming, although often politely suggest not making waves until they get accustomed to the "norms and mores" of the group. A long-time member confessed: "We're weird. We're assholes. Don't come in trying to impress us because we'll just laugh at you."

Interestingly, the values that I found most commonly desired in new members were intelligence, humor, and "a thick skin." This admission betrayed the characteristics that existing members of the group value and, I believe, see in themselves. It also betrayed the emotional attachment that exists between users and the group. Thunderdome is more than a cold composite of news stories and data points. To its users, Thunderdome is a community of living, breathing individuals. Just as Goffman demonstrated in face-to-face interactions, intruders must adapt to the dominant power relationships of a given social setting. It should be no surprise that "real life" behaviors are mimicked in cyberspace. As discussed previously with the user profile, Facebook goes through great effort to combine the online and

offline personalities into one. The dynamic shown here reveals that the group structure also represents this desire for unity. Users of the virtual community treat it like a "real life" community. Users want to "know" with whom they are interacting. As expressed in interviews, members of the group place a level of belief in each other. If a new participant is attempting to hide an aspect of themselves, whether through a fake name or an ambiguous profile picture, or just an obstinate refusal to identify their profession or where they live, members become suspicious and hostile. One member posed his disdain in the form of a question: "You 're joining [our] cocktail party, but you don't want to introduce yourself to give those of us already here a little context?" He added, "there's an implicit lack of trust, there." One of the consequences of Facebook's attempts to fuse the offline and the online selves is the resulting expectation of honesty. "If I'm being open about who I am, why aren't they?" Facebook's parameters for constructing identity are directly feeding the creating of communities within its social network; Facebook is itself a form of vernacular control over these new virtual communities.

The expectation of honesty and transparency is perhaps best demonstrated with an example of a time when the understood social decorum was ignored. The new member ritual was moved from an informal suggestion to a formal request after an episode referred to as "Kristoffnacht." The name is an intentional reference to "Kristallnacht," the beginning of the Nazi Final Solution. By absurdly equating the two events, it has taken on more meaning and significance. The name is also illustrative, as it also happened at night, and was a catalyst for further changes regarding group membership. While Thunderdome was still only a few months old, an administrator (named Kristoff[4]) abused his abilities and added over twenty new members in one night. One of those new members then went on to add another dozen. The influx strained the established order and members' comfort zone, in effect, shattering the invisible walls of the community. After months of developing a rapport and forming relationships between eighty relative strangers, the group was besieged by outsiders. The backlash was swift and vocal. Kristoff was stripped of his

administrator rights and the new blood was given the choice to stay and adapt, or leave. In short order, most were gone. Although not formally confirmed, this event helped to cement the burgeoning group identity. Through the daily discussion threads, personal identities were being fleshed out, but Kristoffnacht was a shared event experienced through a common vantage point. In short, it was a bonding moment for many and quickly became a reference point for Thunderome folklore.

More common traditions were codified a few months after the group's creation in the "Written Unwritten Rules"—an obvious and intentional commentary on the formal informality of the group. More reflections on patterns than actual rules, they are as follows [original spelling; full personal names edited]:

> *-Monday is abortion thread day. Don't start an abortion discussion if it ain't Monday.*

> *-Friday is gay marriage thread day. Don't start a gay marriage thread if it ain't Friday.*

> *-Chris should be referred to as Lord Chris. Respect.*

> *-No one may blaspheme Nancy's Vagina.*

> *-Profantiy is acceptable, but you will offend Melissa's ladylike sensibilities.*

> *-The official alcoholic beverage of Thunderdome is scotch. Other kinds of whisky are acceptable, but do not ask for a drink that has fruit or an umbrella in it or you will be mocked.*

-Men can be referred to as fucksticks. Women may be referred to as thundercunts. Vice versa is not acceptable.

-If you get butthurt, we will mock you.

-Anyone may add other people, but if you get drunk and add 25 people, we will probably take away your rights and call your friends names.

-If someone calls someone a racist at any point in a thread, Brian will also call them a racist.

-Any quotes from the Big Lebowski, Star Trek or another pop culture reference will likely result in a thread devolving into discussions of said pop culture reference.
Quote at your peril.

-Official Thunderdome Debate Threads should be reserved to the gladiators, although play-by-play commentary is permitted.

-These rules can change whenever we feel like it.

Again, these "rules" reflect the patterns and traditions valued by the group. Just from reading these and having no knowledge of the specifics or background, someone can get a good understanding of the way the group operates. Rhetoric and text are the only forms of explicit communication, and so rhetoric and text are used to draw out and enforce the culture. This list immediately gives the sense that threads are free-flowing conversations between distinct personalities. The context of the group as a "political debate forum" adds another level of depth to the list.

Political discussions can become heated and often engage personal beliefs and morals. These rules reflect an understanding of this, but contempt for using it as an excuse. In Thunderdome, being offended is no longer a reason to win or lose an argument. Profanity, inebriation, and general irreverence are not just expected, but normalized.

The name itself was part of this attempt to consciously reflect the dynamics represented above. Thunderdome was not the original name of the group. Like any folk group, Thunderdome has its own "creation myth." The origination of the group helps to explain its rules and, to some extent, its culture. Political discussions on Facebook are not new. In fact, they're rather cliché, with various memes circulating about how annoying or predictable they are to non-participants. For the founding core of what would become Thunderdome, political discussions "in the open" were the norm for a few years. Because Facebook allows friends of friends to see comments and posts, the discussions began to include a wide variety of individuals. A negative result of this was that these conversations turned off many others. When presented the opportunity to join a private group, the bulk of that core group—of which I am a member—joined and began to post politically related topics exclusively there. That group was called "Political Debate Libre," the rhetorical implication being that of a free and uncensored forum for political discussion. The new infusion of members, most of whom had a pre-existing relationship, at least in terms of political debates, were met with a less-than-hospitable reception. Personalities and debate styles clashed and, as is often the case in political discussions, emotions ran high. The climax occurred when one member was expelled. In response to having his "voice taken away," he created a rival group in which he could rectify the "failings" that he saw and experienced in the previous situation. It was originally called "The Real Political Debate Libre," obviously referencing the other group. As he was expelled for "incivility," the first—and for a while, only—rule was: "Civility will not be enforced." The edict was short, but conveyed a strong message. An administrator expounded: "I do my best to promote

civility, but will never censor anyone." Another member who approved of the rule fleshed out the meaning as such: "It doesn't say 'Be civil' or 'All bets are off.' It's just civility will not be enforced by an outside actor." The subjective nature of the rule and the explicit negative enforcement power decreed helped to shape the tone of the group from the start.

The blend of the secret nature of the group, the topics of the conversations, and finally, the rule "civility will not be enforced" gave members the freedom to discuss sensitive issues in crass and ridiculous ways, preemptively absolved of their actions. As long as a person could back up his or her declarations, any would be allowed and discussed. The 1985 film *Mad Max Beyond Thunderdome* focused on the efforts of Mad Max (played by Mel Gibson) to survive the "Thunderdome" in post-apocalyptic Australia. The Thunderdome was an arena for gladiatorial-style combat. The crowd provided the appropriate context with the continual chants: "Two men enter, one man leaves." Both the name and the mantra have been intentionally adopted by this online community. It is an ironic moniker in many regards. One member pointed out the inherent inconsistencies: "I like all of the implications: post-apocalypse, gladiator match, one lives, one dies. It's cool, but it's also ridiculous since this is a fucking online forum filled with fat middle-aged Republicans." Another approved because "it reflects the rough and tumble nature of political debate on the internet in the 21st century. It would have been hard to find a more appropriate name." A third noted that "it does sometimes feel like people are fighting to the death." The group members find solace in their own lore and constructed identity.

In many ways, although channeling the name of a fictional dystopia, Thunderdome is a constructed utopia. The rules and guidelines combine with the Facebook conversational format to give Thunderdome its structure. John Potts demonstrated that online communities are not lawless anarchy but rather attempts to establish a society that rejects conventional rules while imposing its own crafted framework. As he concisely stated: "Cybercommunities make their own rules, their

own guidelines" (2004, 250). One member provided a possible rationale and insight into why: "We talk about all the shit you're not supposed to talk about--sex, politics and religion aren't just subjects we discuss, they're the basis for the lion's share of our discussions." By engaging these topics freely and openly and with no restrictions, Thunderdome has become a release valve, a vent for the conversations that are stifled by societal decorum.

Perhaps the best illustration of this can be seen in the use of the word "racist." In Thunderdome, the declaration that someone or something is "racist" has become a joke, even a sort of tradition. This was very much a deliberate attempt to "take the teeth" out of the term. An administrator gave a more complete and contextual explanation: "Racist is a term thrown around as a joke in here because it has become a joke in politics. Everyone who disagrees with a black Democrat is immediately accused of being a racist because that is easier that refuting the substantive argument." Others push back against the tradition, claiming it is neither funny nor clever, but both affirmative and negative reactions prove the word has undeniably become a totem within the group, infused with meaning. But as is often the case with folk expressions, the meaning of "racist" is understood differently within the community than outside. To the external world, calling someone a "racist" is not a joke, nor a way to disarm the direction of a conversation. It is quite the opposite, in fact. Accusing someone of racism is a serious charge in the "real" world. More than one member admitted to having to explain the group's existence and character when, without thinking, they accused a non-member of racism, expecting a laugh. That an individual can blur the lines between the insular Thunderdome customs and the larger societal norms speaks to the power of a desire to rearrange the rules. Within Thunderdome, those rules have been rearranged and new standards for decorum have been set. By consensus the members have created their own utopia. The fact that it exists on the internet just reinforces the literal translation of the word utopia, "no place." The ideal societal structure can be created, so long as the members accept that it is an illusion.

The 21st Century Community

Is Thunderdome a community? I have referred to it as such and have attempted to show that online environments can use both institutional and vernacular forces to form social communities. The evolution of folk studies, a field that has worked to define how communities exist and operate, necessarily must parallel the evolution of communities themselves. The transition from an assemblage of people to a community has traditionally been bounded by physical locality. Off of this, the definition of folk groups has oscillated between both physicality and shared identity. The recent advent of virtual folk groups brings both of these ends of the spectrum into question as both the physical dimension and the shared communal identity are mediated. Simon Bronner's essay "On the Internet as a Folk System" specifically highlighted ways in which the folk expression could be studied and documented without massive changes in methodology or scope (2011, 398-449). Russell Frank claimed the "forwarded email" was a "naturalistic medium" for folklore because it virtually replicated the face-to-face experience (2009, 116). Barbara Kirshenblatt-Gimblett explored how virtual and electronic-based forms of communication related to traditional, physical forms (1996, 21-65). She quoted Howard Rheingold's observation that, "In a virtual community, idle talk is context-setting. Idle talk is where people learn what kind of person you are, why you should be trusted or mistrusted, what interests you" (52). Just as the early study of folklore was rooted in the study of "verbal art" of a physical community (Oring 1986, 14), the new 21st century community uses digital expression and textual conversation to achieve the same ends—the transmission of culture. The old structuralist adage "dog means dog" is still true whether the words being spoken are face-to-face or Facebook-to-Facebook. In a digital environment, though, context has to be written into the text.

Scott McGuire posited that the geographic and cultural boundaries had been made unstable in the post-modern experience. As a result, the "electronic polis"

became more accepted. However, to engage in the virtual meant to remove oneself from the terrestrial (2004, 175). Instead of trying to make sense of the physical landscape, people retreat into constructed environments online. In Thunderdome, this ironic disposition is fully embraced. Members live across the country, from New York to San Francisco. The northeast corridor, Boston to Washington, D.C., is overly represented, but that is a symptom of the nature of inclusion in the group. For some, drinking alcohol has become an integral part of their online personality. The "normal" levels of irreverence are taken down even further and often accompanied by explicitly lewd or, more commonly, misspelled comments. It has become tradition for one member, when drunk, to post a litany of YouTube videos. Reactions to these posts are usually a comical acknowledgment that he is drunk and to leave him be. But just as Goffman saw that identities were created through repetition of performances, when this member is posting YouTube videos, the others are safe to read into this the context of his inebriation. Given the geographic distance, there is no way to confirm whether the person is or is not actually drunk, so the very act itself becomes a performance. The rest of the group knows that this member is drunk because he is exhibiting signs of being drunk, including typo-ridden and overly profane statements, and seemingly nonsensical or off-topic posts. These actions are accepted honestly because they mimic and reflect "real" drunkenness and because they add character depth. Just as Facebook provided the institutional means for vernacular expression, the reproduction of immediate vernacular expression allowed users and members to feel as if they were experiencing the action in person. Any reservations a user might have about the physical distance between members were removed with the performance of immediacy. With real-time communication, the "tyranny of geography" was conquered (Potts 2004, 250).

So why does this group exist? We have seen *how* this group exists, the rules and customs that bind these individuals together. The desire to discuss distasteful topics in private is certainly reasonable. The appeal of a constructed utopia bound by rules of its own choosing is similarly understandable. Social networking

platforms like Facebook provide users with the ability to present themselves in as much digital detail as possible. When the boundaries between the offline self and the online self are cracked, the resulting form might be a construct, but that does not make it—or you—less "real." And as individuals we have a want for interpersonal connection. We also want to not just listen, but to be heard. This is evident in the thousands of individual blogs that fill up space on the internet. Participatory media like wikis, blogs, comments sections, instant messaging, and other forms, rely on textual and visual expression. In order to be "correctly" heard, however, context must be added and understood. In face-to-face communication, context can be demonstrated through inflection, hand motions, facial expressions, and the like. When text is the only form of expression a new language must be developed. That new language uses the same words and characters, but imposes personality and disposition. These factors are only understood over time and with appropriate training, whether online or offline. The creator of the group has met up with members of Thunderdome in "real life" and affirmed the benefits of depth and context. "When you know someone, you can 'hear' their voice and cadence in their typed words. When the only experience anyone has of you is solely through Facebook, meeting with them in person gives them and you an opportunity to flesh out a picture not fully drafted online." By spending the time to "see" the person behind the name and "hear" their voice, members of Thunderdome are deliberately attempting to overcome the failings of the digital presentation.

The members I interviewed saw value in Thunderdome, primarily in regard to learning about the news of the day and listening to viewpoints of which they might not normally be exposed. Others appreciated the rumbling debates that allowed them the opportunity to test and reaffirm their own beliefs. To facilitate this, most admitted to playing "devil's advocate" at some point. A lawyer in the group confessed to using Thunderdome arguments as an intellectual exercise. "As a lawyer, I need to be able to see and make both sides to any argument." These contrasted with how they use Facebook in general. Most responded that they take

advantage of Facebook's connectivity to efficiently and benevolently stay in touch with friends or relatives. In these answers the differences were clear: Facebook is a place of passive tranquility; Thunderdome is an active and raucous chaos, mediated only by the (rhetorical) vigilante justice of others—or as The Dome calls it, "pinballing," itself a vulgar reference to the 1988 film, *The Accused*. It is not a stretch to suppose that Thunderdome partly exists because Facebook users are self-conscious of how they present themselves online. The downside to participatory media environments is that they are unrestricted. As one member stated, "I used to post political topics on my personal page non-stop and I know for a fact some people did not like that." Another echoed that sentiment: "I used to have long, heated political discussions on my personal wall, which have entirely shifted to the Dome. I see this as a good thing, as I think it turned off some people, and as stated above, both I and the other Domers can write without fear of outside judgment." To understand the role and appeal of Thunderdome it is necessary to appreciate that last point.

Just as Facebook attempted to reconcile the "splintered cogito" through enhanced profile options, users saw the ability to embrace the fractured self and play out each side of their personality. The emotions and desires and passions that are left out in one medium do not go away, but must find new avenues of expression. If society dictates that discussing politics is inappropriate or improper, a person will create a space in which discussing politics is not only appropriate and proper, but that also challenges additional societal rules. This digital utopia facilitates the presentation of the self in the everyday digital life by allowing the person to shape his or her personality through contextual text. Online identities do not simply end at the transmitting of your likes and dislikes or the addition of a profile picture. The offline person has to identify and categorize features that he or she wants to project into cyberspace. The digital world is not comprehensive, though. Physical boundaries have been replaced with digital boundaries. Just as with geographic groups, the cultures that develop behind those walls form a community based on

shared values and norms and a shared folkloric language. The individual though is split, not between mind and body, but between online stages. One Facebook member—one person —uses the same profile to participate in the culture of various communities. As seen by just comparing "open" Facebook and "secret" Thunderdome, online communities can have drastically different expectations and standards, separated only by the internalization of folkloric boundaries. In one setting, words and topics are taboo; in another, they are accepted and encouraged. The user then has to consciously negotiate the different stages, switching between masks with every click of the mouse. In the dystopic future, two men fought to the death in the Thunderdome; only one man left alive. However, in a unified digital world, deliberate attempts to construct specific arenas that require varying performances ensures that while one man enters, two men live.

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Notes

[1] The collection of community information was done with the prior knowledge of a community members. Before publishing this report, the community was made aware of its existence and given the opportunity to object to any aspects. No objections were made to me at that time.

[2] "Community Standards," Facebook, accessed December 12, 2012, http://www.facebook.com/communitystandards.

[3] Ibid.

[4] Name changed.

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