WRITING GAMES: COLLABORATIVE WRITING IN DIGITAL-LUDIC SPACES

by

NICOLE EMMEHAINZ

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We hereby approve the dissertation of

Nicole Emmelhainz

candidate for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy*.

Committee Chair

Kimberly Emmons

Committee Member

T. Kenneth Fountain

Committee Member

Sarah Gridley

Committee Member

William Deal

Date of Defense

May 16th, 2014

*We also certify that written approval has been obtained for any proprietary material contained therein
Table of Contents

Table of Contents i
List of Tables iv
Acknowledgments ii
Abstract iii
Introduction 1
Chapter 1: ISO a Writing Friend: Protagonize as a Space for Playful Collaboration 46
Chapter 2: Getting the Hang of Things: How SNSs Create Connections Through Writing 71
Chapter 3: Writing’s More Fun Together: From Discussion Board Game to Collaborative Writing Project 112
Conclusion: Status Update to Term Paper: How SHSs Could Allow Student Writers to Collaborate and Have Fun 145
Appendix 163
Bibliography 181
List of Tables

Table 1: Protagonize Data Collection Overview  45
Table 2: Collaborative Corner Threads  92
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Abstract

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This dissertation examines how social network site (SNS) platforms enhance writers’ experiences of pleasure and play in the process of writing together. My primary site of study is Protagonize.com, a SNS that encourages member-generated collaborative creative writing. Correlating Bakhtin’s theory of utterance, Huizinga’s understanding of play, and Wittgenstein’s concept of language games, I argue that Protagonize.com allows writers to engage in writing practices where authorship becomes inherently collaborative, context adapts to users’ needs, and the social-dimension of language emerges.
Introduction

“Play in language is the undeniable id, bubbling up no matter how stringent the controls. When the medium expands beyond the austere conventions of the book, as it has with the computer, the suppressed play of language and its user can more easily move to the foreground.” — Albert Rouzie

Where can playfulness be found in the writing classroom? Should playfulness even come into our understanding of the college-level writing classroom? As humans, it is in our nature to be playful. Through play we learn how to speak, move, interact with others, and see the world around us. Being playful allows us to temporarily forget about ourselves, live more fully in the present moment, build strong relationships with the people who matter to us, and form lasting impressions about those people and ourselves. How could such a fundamental part of who and what we are not exist in some form in spaces — academic, vocational, creative — which emphasize personal expression, communication, and especially connections?

Play as it facilitates connection has been a productive force in my college composition and creative writing classrooms since I first began teaching, though I have only recently begun to reflect on its power. In one of the first freshmen composition courses I taught as a Master’s student, I developed a unit and paper assignment that focused on notions of home and literacy. As we talked about what home means to us at different times in our lives, and some of our most clear memories of our homes, the students would frequently get side-tracked. Their enthusiastic sharing of anecdotes might have been disruptive, but instead this sharing helped to bring these new college students closer together. They felt like they knew one another a little better through their sharing.
Their sharing of their stories brought about connections between them as both students learning to write as well as individuals with some generally common experiences. When the students turned in their final papers describing their childhood homes and the writing and reading they did there, the papers were so strong that I wanted to do something more with their writing. I asked each student to choose his or her favorite lines or short passages. I then collected those selected lines into one document and made copies for each of my twenty students. I brought scissors, tape, and extra paper. In class, we all cut, copied, and pasted the lines to make unique narratives. Then we read the “class homes” we had created. The entire class period was enjoyable and fun. We all talked as we worked, moving the lines around, sharing more stories, telling jokes. This set the tone for the remainder of the semester; we became a community of writers, working and playing together to share ideas, to come to an understanding about the ability of writing to connect us to one another.

I consider this moment from my teaching pivotal because it showed my students and me the value of community, collaboration, and play. It showed us the importance of connections, even and especially in classroom spaces. I had only just started learning about writing pedagogy, about student-centered learning, collaborative writing, and the rhetorical situation. Yet, this one activity helped me to set into motion my own ideas and preferences for creating classroom spaces that would allow for the most effective student writing to happen: a pedagogy of connection. The activity for the cut-and-paste story evolved naturally from the work my students did in their individual papers. It showed them that not only was their writing ‘good,’ but that their ideas should be the focus of an activity. It also showed them a type of collaborative writing, using their own ideas and
those of their peers to create a completely new text. Finally, it let community and relationships grow, as during the composition and sharing of the cut-and-paste stories, students not only got to know those in the class based on their writing, but also on their casual conversations with each other. They could talk about their written ideas — explicitly meeting and working with the audience I asked them to imagine they were writing for — while also sharing related information and stories. I did not have to directly insert theory into the classroom, or to sloganize ideas about the collaborative learning and writing theories of Kenneth Bruffee or Andrea Lunsford and Lisa Ede. Instead, by letting them be playful together while writing, my students experienced the insights of Bruffee, Lunsford and Ede: writing is not a lonely endeavor engaged in by isolated authors expressing themselves to no one, but rather it is a fundamentally social activity, intrinsically pleasurable, and has the benefit of establishing connections and preventing alienation.

What this activity did is what Albert Rouzie addresses in the epigraph. As the class diverged from the set plans, the natural instinct to play came out. What this looked like was not a more typical classroom, where students ask and answer questions and take notes, but more like a study session. Students talked with one another, joked around, laughed, but still focused on the work at hand. Though to some instructors, this seemingly non-serious atmosphere might be counter-productive, it actually allowed for the students to experiment and question their ideas more, and consequently allowed for the students and their ideas to take control of the classroom space. Many students begin their college writing career believing in the myth of the solitary author, of a lone genius writer, a belief that stems from the contemporary notion of authorship, which Martha
Woodmansee defines as “an individual who is the sole creator of unique ‘works.’” In this view, authorship rests on the originality of the works. Originality becomes a key idea in this definition, one of great importance, so much so that it must therefore be protected by intellectual property laws such as copyright (“On the Author Effect” 1). This myth, and the pressure this notion of originality creates, can be crushing to young writers’ confidence and understandings of themselves as writers. Activities that bring out the play of the writing act, that show writing as inherently social and connection-driven, not only make for more enjoyable classroom learning, but allow students to situate themselves as writers working within a community. In that atmosphere, they can truly grow as writers. As a teacher, I want to find ways to cultivate similarly vibrant classroom experiences that promote growth of student writers. And I believe this starts with understanding writing as a connective, collaborative, and pleasurable practice.

But where does this pleasurable, collaborative, and connective writing happen today? How can similar practices be brought into the classroom? I believe the answer to these questions, and thus the aim of this project, can be found in the continuously burgeoning world of online social network sites (SNSs). The reason for this is that the way in which our students communicate is changing and continues to change every day through the rapid development of a myriad of technological innovations. Our students now are, to use Marc Prensky’s term, “digital natives,” technology users who “function best when networked” and “prefer games to ‘serious’ work” ("Digital Natives” 6). So, while my early attempt to bring fun and play into a classroom setting was not digital, it did emphasize the networked community of the class, and piecing the different lines
together was, in a way, like figuring out a story puzzle, one that was unique to each student in the class.

The kind of relationship building that happens through SNSs, and the playful communication that facilitates these relationships, is what I am particularly interested in when discussing how this technology might be productively used in college composition and creative writing classrooms. I focus on possible applications of SNSs on these two types of college writing environments because they are classes that students either are required to take (even as non-English majors) or want to take (as any major), so the potential uses of this technology in classroom pedagogy is greater. But also, in my understanding of how to structure these two classroom settings, there can be much pedagogical overlap between composition and creative writing classes. In my example above, while the original assignment the students choose lines from was an expository essay, it could still be considered somewhat creative in its scope, as it asked students to reflect on specific experiences from their own lives (much like memoir). In the creative writing classes I have taught, I often have students critically examine the choices they make in their writing, such as how they incorporate specific devices and what those devices will lead a reader to experience (e.g. a particular emotional reaction). The lines between these two classrooms are not as definitely drawn as they may often appear in today’s university.

Another key overlap between these two classes is the writing workshop. In the composition class, these may be periodically used as a group activity to emphasize audience and drafting and revision. In creative writing classrooms, though, they are usually key components to the development and planning of the class as a whole.
Looking objectively at how instructors use workshops in composition classes compared to their use in creative writing classrooms, it seems to be that creative writing classes emphasize the importance of audience, of writing’s social nature, in much more concrete and consistent ways than composition classes. Yet one of the ultimate goals for both composition and creative writing is the same: clear written expression of students’ ideas for an audience. In composition classes, that audience frequently is a murkier construction than it is in creative writing classrooms, where students understand from the first day that they will frequently share their writing with one another, and perhaps even seek publication opportunities that will continue to broaden the audience for their works.

Bringing SNS technology into both composition and creative writing classrooms allows for the notion of audience and community to be explicit from the beginning. Being digital natives, students will already be familiar and comfortable with the platform. They will know the rules for playing around on the site. But they will also be able to establish and strengthen connections through different types of interactions they can have, interactions that will happen both inside and outside the designated class time. They will have an audience at all times they can go back to with questions and comments. They will have a more visible stake in the learning and textual production of the classroom because their ideas will always be there, easy to find and focus on when needed. With SNS technology, students will start to find a voice and will start to gain confidence in themselves and their writing as a supportive, encouraging community grows.

As of this writing, there are no instructors at my university that use SNSs to facilitate much of their classroom activity, so there is no real-life site of study available. Therefore, I will focus on a publicly-available, non-academic SNS called
Protagonize.com. Protagonize focuses on collaboratively-written creative writing, but also includes many SNS features that are common to other sites, like user profiles, group pages, and comment sections. While this is not an educational site, the writing community-centered nature of the site promotes much discussion about the complete process of writing: from idea creation to brainstorming to drafting to revision. Members learn from one another, from their interactions with one another through their various forms of written communication, how to be a writer. As members learn from and write with one another, they also demonstrate that writing is a fundamentally social act, one made better through the interactions that occur when people work together. This community support is key, I believe, and that is why Protagonize, as a social network site dedicated to forming communities of writers who will write together, is a useful site to analyze for future applications of this technology in college writing classrooms. Seeing how communities form on the site, and how these communities of writers talk about writing and then write with each other can yield interesting observations and ideas for creating similar conditions to spur writing, in the face-to-face classroom activities and through the incorporation of similar kinds of technologies to supplement and complement the work being done in the classroom.

This project will look at two types of communication and writing that happens on Protagonize. The first are asynchronous discussion board conversations that happen on one of the site’s groups, Collaborative Corner. These conversations are useful not only for finding others to write with, but for showing newer members how collaborative writing happens on the site. In short, the conversations analyzed will demonstrate how members learn the rules for playing the writing game on Protagonize. The second type of
communication analyzed will be both the Collaborative Corner discussion board thread and the creative writing piece with its comment section for a specific writing project. Entitled “Ten,” this project started as a game, asking other members to write audition pieces to be judged in competition with one another to win a spot on a collaborative team. The public collaborative writing of the story, along with the authors’ and readers’ comments, shows how writing can be accomplished through these community-driven sites.

One of my objectives when I gave my freshman composition students the paper with each other’s favorite lines was to have them see themselves as writers. But again, at the time, I did not think of my goal with this level of clarity. I had thought that their writing was really good, clever, and creative. It showed me that they were engaged with the assignment. I wanted to let them know, in a way that was more than an ‘A’ on their papers, that I thought they were writers. I wanted them to self-identify as writers, too. Developing a community-centered activity that focused on their writing let me do that. It is my belief and hope that incorporating SNS technology into the college writing classroom can also help students come to see themselves as writers. It is easier to come to that identity within the context of a group than it can be on one’s own; having others around, who can share their struggles and triumphs, brings writing down to the level of process, one that presents challenges to everyone no matter how practiced or experienced one may be. I can think of no better way to see yourself as a writer than by building connections with others through writing together.

Social Network Sites: A Brief History
Since the late 1990s, social network sites (SNSs) have permitted users to choose from a variety of options in order to create and maintain different types of online presences for a variety of audiences. With the advances in technology and the more user-friendly designs of Web 2.0, users gained and continue to gain more control over how and with whom they interact. Of course, these user affordances are built into the structure of the sites; it is up to the users of these sites to incorporate them in specific ways for specific purposes. According to danah boyd and Nicole Ellison, SNSs have the following characteristics: they allow individuals to “(1) construct a public or semi-public profile within a bounded system, (2) articulate a list of other users with whom they share a connection, and (3) view and traverse their list of connections and those made by others within the system” (“Social Network Sites” 211). It is clear, then, that one of the primary aims of SNSs is to establish an online connection with others, and that these connections become important when defining and authenticating one’s online presence. The establishment of connection, which I believe is a pillar of community formation, becomes explicit in SNSs; it is what these sites have been designed to do, and I believe this is a large part of their appeal to their users. People seek connection, even when it can be obtained through virtual rather than lived means.

Questions of interest for researchers from different fields who study SNSs, such as sociology, psychology, and marketing and public relations, include the following: Why do users choose to use certain sites over others? How do they establish and maintain a presence on the site(s) they use? What type of connections do they make? A variety of different theories have grown with the study of SNSs, and according to Namkee Park, Jae Eun Chung, and Seungyoon Lee, it is most helpful when studying users and technology
preferences to incorporate several theories in the analysis of data. In “Explaining the Use of Text-Based Communication Media: An Examination of Three Theories of Media Use,” Park, Chung, and Lee discuss individuals’ selection and use of technology for specific types of communication by focusing on three theories or models for understanding technology use: media richness theory, uses and gratifications approach, and the study of network effects. While their research focuses on communication use and preferences among three different types of technology — email, cell phone text messaging, and Facebook wall posts — their findings lead them to conclude that Facebook wall posts were more frequently used because of their ease of use and their quick information access to others. Another possible reason for this preference was that using the SNS allowed these users to also connect with the larger community they belonged to on the site. Communication via SNS channels with their larger social communities is more pleasurable, as the possibilities for more than one recipient/respondent to the initial message are greater. Having multiple audiences, then, is one of the appeals of communication done through SNSs.

While Park, Chung, and Lee’s study does provide reasons for users to select a SNS such as Facebook for communication purposes, it does not go on to discuss in detail the repercussions for posting information on a friend’s wall that can be viewed by others.

Zizi Papacharissi, in “A Networked Self: Identity Performance and Sociability on Social

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1 Media richness theory “proposes that individuals distinguish communication technologies from ‘lean’ to ‘rich’ based on the technologies’ intrinsic properties” (358). The uses and gratifications approach “emphasizes active roles of audiences in media choice and use” (358), and the study of network effects seeks to understand the connection between the “popularity of a given technology as a measure of social network effects [and how the] perceptions affects individuals’ adoption and use of the new technology” (359).

2 van Dijck makes this clear when she says that “Social media platforms are anything but ‘free spaces’ where opinions are negotiated so that collective opinions can be formed”
Network Sites,” focuses on what it means to present a self on a SNS. She argues that SNSs provide a “stage” for individuals to present particular identities to various audiences. It is on the SNS stage that the identities individuals have in both their public and private lives frequently overlap. This means that for any given person who maintains a SNS profile, they are always potentially connecting with multiple audiences. Though part of the structure of SNSs is personal or “‘egocentric,’ with the individual at the center of their own community” (boyd and Ellison 219), the list of connections users have often “provide context by offering users an imagined audience to guide behavioral norms” (boyd and Ellison 220). It is likely that whether or not the user of a SNS is consciously aware of it, she often selects how and what information she communicates with others based on the possible audiences that message may reach and the ways in which she anticipates that audience to react or respond to her message.

The self-censoring that SNS users may participate in is nothing that they are not already familiar with doing in their everyday real life experiences. Papacharissi states that people frequently must be able to change their behavior depending on the company and social situation they are in. She points out that, "In every day cycles of self-presentation and impression formation, individuals perform on multiple stages, and in doing so, they blend social spheres online that may have been separate offline, thus confusing private and public boundaries" (209). This blending of social spheres, of private and public personas, must happen, though, because in order to verify one’s identity on most SNSs, the user must include “public displays of social connections or friends [in order] to authenticate identity and introduce the self through the reflexive process of fluid association with social circles" (207). Social network sites, of course, would not function
as they do (or be called what they are) if they did not rely upon the creation of online networks of others that users know. And, just like the user’s offline personality is multifaceted, the online personality must also be so, and this can only be verified or made real through the inclusion of different social spheres that users are a part of offline. Of course, depending on the nature of one’s real life social network communities, and the individuals who make up those communities, the online social network of any given user may have gaps or be incomplete. But even in instances where the online community a user joins is formed entirely of individuals she does not know in her offline life, she still creates a distinct persona that, over time, will be verified through the consistency of her usage and interactions with others in the online community.

As Papacharissi notes, juggling one’s self-presentation from one social context to another is a common activity for each of us, an activity that we are most likely not even aware of doing any longer. The types of identity creation and communication SNSs prompt their users to perform — completing a personal profile, selecting an avatar to visually represent the user, posting and commenting on others’ post — often mimic the social behaviors we engage in every day. Often, SNSs make explicit such offline behaviors by incorporating them into their structure, thus calling attention to these behaviors. In “Facebook as a Tool for Producing Sociality and Connectivity,” Jose van Dijck discusses the way in which SNSs incorporate private, public, and corporate spheres in new ways to create a new kind of sociality and connectivity. According to van Dijck, SNSs “support (informal) sociality—chat, talk, verbal exchange of taste, gossip, reflections—deploying sophisticated technological mechanisms that both inscribe preexisting norms for behavior and interaction and at the same time challenge these
norms” (165). Her primary example of this is the first Facebook platform that debuted on Harvard’s campus, which was originally meant for male students to rate the attractiveness of female students on campus. Though men rating women’s attractiveness is a behavior regularly (and usually privately) performed, the SNS made the activity public and therefore open to critique. In this case, then, the private behavior made explicit through the SNS was one that received a negative response. Other typically private behaviors, for example, those that fall within the realm of the writing process, such as brainstorming or freewriting, could benefit in productive ways through their publicization on SNSs, such as Protagonize, that make clear writing’s social nature.

Of course, users may not, at first, like the way a specific offline behavior becomes incorporated into the SNS, and often SNSs may modify their format or use due to user feedback and/or demands (boyd and Ellison 217). The fluidity of SNSs both speaks to the overall character of Internet–based technologies as well as the level of activity and production that users frequently have in Web 2.0. As Papacharissi states, “SNSs reinforce the social character of online environments, by fostering interaction adapted to the online setting” (212). Of course, users should not be naive in their use of SNSs², but within these spaces they can create and maintain connections to a variety of individuals, those they know in real life and those they do not, using many different means of written communication. Much of this communication is infused with the same kinds of playful language that people use throughout their lives to create and reinforce relationships and connections, such as joking and telling stories. While not all communication is

² van Dijck makes this clear when she says that “Social media platforms are anything but ‘free spaces’ where opinions are negotiated so that collective opinions can be formed” (163). This is why, she argues, SNS do not meet the definition of public spaces as laid out by Habermas.
necessarily playful, the potential for creative, enjoyable language use is always present on SNSs, as it is in any situation where people can converse and form relationships with each other. It is through users’ engagement with various playful languages that relationships and larger communities form and thrive, as we are all naturally tuned in to and can respond to play. It is this characteristic of creating and maintaining relationships that I believe makes SNSs a natural space for collaboration and play in writing. Before discussing these connections, though, it is useful to talk about play and collaboration separately.

**Play, Pleasure, and Writing**

*Play and Work*

Play has become a concept that cannot easily be defined because it is simply taken as a ‘given’ what is meant by it, and it is through this uncritical assumption that the word gets frequently used to mean a variety of different things. Some of the more common associations include a physical action, either undertaken by oneself or with others, such as playing a sport, a mental action, again done either alone or with others, such as strategy tabletop board games, or casual joking or horseplay between friends or coworkers. Because of the multi-faceted nature of the concept ‘play,’ it is helpful to go back to one of the foundational texts in play studies to understand how it has been traditionally defined. This foundational work, *Homo Ludens* by German historian Johan Huizinga, describes play, which is not an activity exclusive to humans, as an important component of human civilization. Play, in fact, is an important part in the development of human society and has developed several social characteristics. Huizinga identifies these social characteristics as the following: “Play is a voluntary activity or occupation
executed within certain fixed limits of time and place, according to rules freely accepted but absolutely binding, having its aim in itself and accompanied by a feeling of tension, joy and the consciousness that it is ‘different’ from ‘ordinary life’”(28).³ Many of these characteristics are useful when looking broadly at SNSs and how they function and the more specific types of activities and communication that happens on the sites among their users. The sites themselves are completely voluntary, participation within them has limits within time and place, set rules are adhered to (though in some circumstances enforced through site moderators or challenged and changed by the users themselves), and they are clearly different from regular life, though one could argue they are becoming, in some ways, extensions of real life.

Despite its importance and prevalence in our lives, play is not simply a mindless instinct; Huizinga believes that play is infused with meaning and significance. Also, contrary to common connotation, play is not necessarily the opposite of seriousness or work. Indeed, Huizinga cites many forms of play, such as chess and professional sporting events, which may be deeply seriousness but nonetheless playful. Regardless of the extent to which play includes seriousness, Huizinga notes that a key feature of play is how the players, consciously or not, understand that they are performing actions, which are, indeed, auxiliary to everyday life. They willingly allow themselves to become lost in the act of play, in whatever form that may take.

Even though play has a social and collaborative nature to it, and has been vital to the formation of our civilization, according to Huizinga, in many Western societies, such

³ Huizinga and his understanding of play, and how his conception of play can help us understand the functions of SNSs, will be discussed in more detail in Chapter 3 of this work.
as the United States, play has developed a rather negative connotation. Play is assumed to be the opposite of work, an activity that has become strongly privileged through the adherence to the Protestant work ethic. Mark Bowman, in “Making Work Play,” discusses this commonly held belief that play and work are naturally opposite activities. He sees this work/play divide manifest in many ways, including the following ‘truths’:

If work is serious and important, then play is trivial and insignificant; if work is productive, then play is unproductive and inconsequential; if work is for adults, then play is for children; if work is disciplined and compulsory, then play is free and spontaneous; if work is encouraged, then play is to be avoided. (62)

Bowman outlines here several of the conflicting characteristics that are commonly held by adults in the Western world. In these terms, work receives a place of dignity and status; it is no wonder with this definition of work (serious and important, productive, adult-oriented, disciplined and compulsory, encouraged) that people tend to define themselves by what they have sold their time to do. Bowman presents an argument that work and play can, instead, be interwoven throughout the normal work routine to make tasks more enjoyable, an argument that contradicts many of these deeply-held beliefs. But though it challenges what now seem to be common-sense ideals about work, Bowman’s claim opens ways for people to work and play together, which he further believes can make them more productive. Part of his evidence includes interviews with a variety of people from different backgrounds and jobs. One of these individuals, who operates a machine that makes tires, says he has found a way to challenge himself and make a game out of tire making by constantly setting challenges for himself and seeing if he can make his goals. This seemingly simply attitude toward what might otherwise be a menial job has allowed this person to find more pleasure in his work. Also, his playful attitude
toward his job has strengthened his social connections with his coworkers, as they see him as a happy, hard-working individual.

The key to achieving this kind of attitude is how one perceives the tasks they are asked to do. Bowman explains that, “When it is realized that both work and play are interactional events, attention then must be directed to the many ways these activities are related and socially achieved. [...] sometimes work activities are accomplished quite playfully” (70). Here Bowman gets at the heart of what I am interested in with the concept of play. Not only is it a primary, perhaps even primal, aspect of ourselves, but also it is a social or “interactional” activity. I want to show that writing can be just as playful as other activities commonly associated with play because writing, too, is a fundamentally social act. Sites like Protagonize, then, become useful as an object of study that focuses on writing and play because it is vital to this site that users experience writing as “interactional,” as playful. This experience will reinforce the joy the writing activity brings, and the users will be more likely to keep returning to the site. With my interest in writing instruction, I believe that cultivating similar attitudes toward writing — that it is a fun, social activity — will go far in helping students become better writers and communicators.

*Play, Pleasure, and Writing*

In composition studies, when “play” has been discussed, the word seems to suggest both an attitude toward the act of writing as well as certain characteristics within the writing itself. When Albert Rouzie uses the term in his book *At Play in the Fields of Writing*, he does so in opposition to the term work, which, as Bowman identifies, has strong connotative associations as the opposite of play. Rouzie defines the opposition
between work and play in this way: “Play, when figured as leisure in opposition to work, carries an aura of privilege. Whereas the aristocracy barred itself from any work that could not be construed as play, the emergence of a middle class for whom this was not achievable led inevitably to separate spheres of leisure and work” (20). Another point that Rouzie wants to make is that in the writing classroom, this separate sphere of work and play needs to be reconfigured, to allow for writing to be felt as play while at the same time providing valuable tools for the students to learn to become better communicators. Rouzie talks about play and its companion term, pleasure, when he discusses some of his own writing experiences:

The pleasure I felt was a sign of my intrinsic motivation. I had moments of composing that felt pleasurable, that I did for their own sake. This sense is important to play, because a playful approach cannot thrive when the composer is primarily focused on the external rewards and punishments. There must be pleasure in the thing itself, in the process, and in the collaboration. (7)

What is implied in this explanation of Rouzie’s writing habits is that to experience writing as play involves a particular mental attitude toward the activity. The process becomes recursive for the writer in that the more enjoyment, or pleasure, he experiences during the act of writing, the more likely he will be to continue writing. Pleasure becomes both an experience and an association that an individual has as a result of the act of play. However, I believe that play and pleasure are more interdependent than one occurring because of the other. Pleasure and play are, in fact, more than just experiences and are essential attitudes an individual takes on that become important in the act of writing. Again, if students come to understand the act of writing as one that is rooted in social interaction, and therefore a means of building connections between other writers, they will come to associate writing as something done for fun, another kind of play. In a
classroom setting, though it may be difficult to completely take away the notion of punishments and reward (which most often come in the forms of grades), it is still possible to make the writing about sociality, collaboration, and reciprocity by creating assignments that emphasize these traits.

But how to create such assignments, and a larger classroom setting, that imbue writing’s social, collaborative, and playful nature? A key idea to doing this is to understand what pleasure means to writing. T.R. Johnson, in *A Rhetoric of Pleasure*, focuses on what pleasure in writing means and how it can be fostered in the classroom. He argues that throughout the evolution of the university English department, there has been a push towards professionalism, towards exact writing standards, as a means to legitimize the department’s standing in the university at large. Johnson sees this as the catalyst for a work/play divide within English departments. While studying and teaching literature is ‘fun’ and ‘playful,’ writing is ‘work,’ something that causes pain and alienation in the student writers.

Johnson sees certain “renegade rhetorics,” such as Expressivism and *écriture feminine*, as allowing a way for instructors to reinvent the writing process as a pleasurable one. He, in fact, traces ideas of what he calls “renegade rhetorics” back to Gorgias, and states that a definition of writing as pleasure, or what Johnson calls “authorial pleasure,” can be derived from Gorgias: “it is the feeling that ensues during the composing process that is roughly analogous to the transformation of pain and alienation into knowledge and connection” (2). Authorial pleasure, a key concept for Johnson, and one that I want to adopt as vital for my own project here and in my pedagogy, is, put most simply, *the connection between the author and reader*. When students see writing
as work, as an individually driven and realized task, they cannot experience connection, and may experience instead alienation. But, when we teach writing as a play-infused activity, one where forming connections with others is at the center, then students can begin to learn how to more easily and skillfully tackle the serious work that writing assignments often ask them to do (conduct research, develop a thesis, support the thesis, etc.). They will know that there are others who make up their community, who can offer feedback and help, or just acknowledge their ideas.

Johnson’s examples of playful writing include much creative writing and ancient rhetorical devices, which he believes are key to establishing connections between authors and readers. It seems, though, that when developing playful writing, Johnson is not as concerned with how it is done, but the results: “playing implies a performance that unfolds in and with time […] while play might yield tangible results, these are not really the purpose of the activity but something more like incidental souvenirs or toys that serve only to spur yet further, more pleasurable continuation of the activity” (32, emphasis original). The consequences of play, with writing and perhaps with all other play-centered activities, are more important than the play itself. Johnson insists that play simply inspires the player to keep doing the activity, and that the pleasure it invokes is enough to provoke repetition. By infusing writing and writing classrooms with play and pleasure, he believes that students can learn the difficult, frequently elusive key to becoming effective writers, a process which he describes as the following:

[W]hen our writing proceeds fluently rather than in tortured fits and starts, with writing rhythmic thrust rather than in diffuse, undisciplined clumps, and with the feeling of a reply to an interlocutor who is immediately present rather than with a hazy sense of there being little possibility of ever actually being read, when all of these conditions apply, we are inhabiting a mysterious, highly pleasurable
territory that all successful writers have learned to cultivate and, when they sit
down to write, to summon with some fair degree of consistency. (30)

What is at stake in finding ways to bring playful writing into the college-level writing
classroom is showing our students how to be writers. Playful writing is writing that
ultimately connects to and possibly establishes a community of writers. When writing in
a community, writing reveals itself as the social activity it is, and when writers know
others are reading their work, the act of composition becomes pleasurable, and therefore
more likely to be repeated. Writing done through SNSs, like Protagonize, allows for all of
these characteristics to develop: community-oriented, play-infused writing that leads to
an experience of pleasure and connection for all users.

When a writer learns that writing can be playful, pleasurable, and community-
centered, these attitudes move the writer beyond the traditional reward-and-punishment
system associated with tasks labeled as work. When approached in this play-and-pleasure
manner, writing in fact appears to transcend work, what it is typically considered within
the academy and English departments, and instead becomes something profoundly more
centered on the individual and her ability to make connections with those around her.
Writing that becomes infused with play and pleasure can be understood as self-fulfilling
in its ability to continuously motivate the writer. It is this type of attitude, then, that
Rouzie believes writing instructors should facilitate in their classrooms, to help create
and then reinforce the notion that writing is a fun and therefore beneficial activity for
students to do.

The idea that play as it manifests in writing is as much an attitude that the writer
must take on as it is specific characteristics of the writing itself is a belief that other
writing scholars focus on as well. Hans Ostrom, in “Grammar J, As in Jazzing Around,”
defines play as “the opposite of getting hung up an anything” (75, emphasis original).

This implies that to play means to let go of any expectations or preconceived notions the writer may have about the writing he will produce, expectations likely brought on through the rewards and punishments system many instructors operate under. Like Rouzie and Johnson, Ostrom also associates play and work, but he does so in a way that brings the two concepts together. “Plerk” is his term for play-work, which is how a child (and anyone else) learns how to do things more effectively. For example, when learning a language involves playing a card game, then the process of learning (what may be called work) becomes more pleasurable for the student. The student more thoroughly learns the language because his attitude toward the process of acquisition is one of open-mindedness, relaxation, and fun. As Ostrom states, “Play is not incidental but vital” (83), because without play, and without the attitude that comes with it, learning will be more drudgery, more hassle than it may need to be. Specifically with writing, what a “plierk” understanding of the activity gives to the students is the ability to make the writing their own by focusing on expressing their ideas authentically and in ways that connect to their audience, an essential feature, according to Ostrom, for students to be able to do in order to become better writers.

Ostrom defines several characteristics of writing done under the auspices of plerk. These are rhythm, contest, collaboration, and possession or ownership. Of particular interest to my work is what he says about collaboration. According to Ostrom, collaboration is another given of the writing process: “Students should play off of one another’s papers, cowrite, corevise, revise professors’ prose, codesign paper topics” (83). In the real world, “ensemble writing is the rule, not the exception” (emphasis in original,
This declaration is similar to the conclusion that Ede and Lunsford come to in their study on collaborative writing in professional workplaces. It also seems to echo Kenneth Bruffee’s discussions of collaborative learning and community-created knowledge. So ‘plerk,’ then, is an activity that facilitates writing together, and this type of writing may be more pleasurable for the writers involved. Several, rather than one, individual writer decides what’s acceptable for the writing, and the group mentality of the writing process legitimates the writing being done.

**Collaborative Writing and Group Writing**

The scholarship on collaborative writing is extensive, with work focusing on its use both inside and outside the academy. Lisa Ede and Andrea Lunsford’s *Singular Texts/Plural Authors: Perspectives on Collaborative Writing*, provides one of the earliest book-length studies on collaborative writing in professional organizations. Wishing to challenge the “commonsense” notion that writing is a solitary practice, Ede and Lunsford surveyed 1,400 randomly selected participants from a number of professional organizations, including the American Consulting Engineers Council, the Modern Language Association, and the Society for Technical Communication. They concluded from their data that collaborative writing, or “group writing [that] includes any writing done in collaboration with one or more persons,” was a regular activity of the individuals working in the organizations (14). This conclusion, along with what they identify as a growing body of critical scholarship on collaborative learning and composition (Bruffee, Elbow) as well as collaborative writing both inside and outside the academy, points toward recognition of the significance of the practice. They believe that the practice of collaborative writing is beneficial for writers because, not only does it produce a singular...
text, but one that is “always animated by a self-conscious plurality, a polyphonic chorus of voices, whose difference – as well as sameness – speaks and is heard” (125-126). And it is the inclusion of a chorus of voices that strengthens that final text, that makes the writing more inclusive, and perhaps more accessible to a variety of readers.

Kami Day and Michele Bodice, like Ede and Lunsford, also focus their research on professional writers, specifically coauthors who work in the academy. In (First Person)\(^2\), Day and Bodice show how coauthors in the academy challenge many deeply held beliefs about the solitary writer and understandings of original, creative work. Day and Eodice, because of their own successful collaborations, wished to study how their own and other writers’ collaboration worked by “studying it from the inside, as it appears to collaborators themselves” (3). Of this, they discovered that beyond the writing practices that make up definitions and understanding of collaborative writing, this practice also involves “trust, respect, and care” (5). They believe that all writing is inherently collaborative and that because of this, traditional “notions of authorship and coauthorship must be reconceived” (11).

With Day and Eodice’s call to reconsider how we define authorship and coauthorship in light of the collaborative nature of writing, it may seem as though collaborative writing practices are a newer interest within the academy and English departments, an interest that appears to begin with Kenneth Bruffee’s work in the late 1960s. However, Anne Gere, in Writing Groups: History, Theory Implications, traces the history of the writing group as it has appeared for professional writers both in and outside of the academy since the nineteenth century. Gere’s work emphasizes the social dimensions of writing while also acknowledging the importance of individual writing
practice. Like the work of Ede and Lunsford and Day and Eodice, Gere understands collaboration as operating against the prevailing notions of the lone author. She believes that collaborative learning and writing practices “build upon an opposition to alienation and to the highly individualistic view inherent in traditional concepts of authorship and emphasize the communal aspects of intellectual life” (75). Candace Spigelman’s study of a non-academic creative writing group and a freshman composition writing group in Across Property Lines: Textual Ownership in Writing Groups substantiates Gere’s claim about the communal nature of collaborative writing. She argues that in writing groups, all texts are “inherently social and public, whether we acknowledge it or not” (4). Writers who work together become more successful because they can build knowledge within a given community together. This social knowledge creation, then, permits a more nuanced understanding on the part of each individual within the group, because they each receive the benefits of the other members’ ideas and assistance through the collaborative process, which may include verbal and written brainstorming, drafting, and revision.

Collaborative Writing and Composition Studies

The benefits to writers who participate in various forms of collaborative writing practices are well researched in composition scholarship (Dale, Co-authoring; Forman, ed., New Visions; Lunsford and Ede, “Collaborative Authorship;” Reagan, Fox, Bleich, eds. Writing With; Speck, Facilitating). One of the most prominent researchers and proponents of collaboration in the writing classroom is Kenneth Bruffee. In “Collaborative Learning and the Conversation of Mankind,” he discusses the history of collaborative learning practices in the university, tracing collaborative learning’s creation as a direct result of more non-traditional students attending college. Traditionally-
structured classrooms, where the teacher was the main source of authority and knowledge, did not help these students learn, but peer-to-peer based learning, such as individual tutoring, did. Bruffee understands these kinds of indirect teaching methods as successful because, while they do not change what students learn, they do change the social context in which the learning takes place (638). When working with peers, rather than learning solely from an expert teacher, students interact with others who are also in the same or similar types of communities. Therefore, the knowledge being used and developed is similar, whereas much of the knowledge being used by the instructors may be unfamiliar (and appear inaccessible) to students.

Bruffee draws from Richard Rorty’s conception of normal and abnormal discourses. Rorty defines a normal discourse as one “which is conducted within an agreed-upon set of conventions” regarding aspects such as contribution, question asking, and question making (Mirror 320). Abnormal discourse, then, occurs when “someone joins in the discourse who is ignorant of these conventions or who sets them aside” (320). So, when students (or anyone) attempt to join in a conversation of a community of knowledge to which they do not belong, they do not have the ability to maintain that conversation. This results in a lack of learning and knowledge making. As Day and Eodice believe that all writing is collaborative, Bruffee believes (via Rorty and Thomas Kuhn) that “knowledge is maintained and established by communities of knowledgeable peers” (646). Successful learning, then, is the product of collaboration with others to sustain knowledge. When writing instructors use collaborative writing activities throughout all stages of the writing process, from brainstorming topic ideas to collaboratively drafting to using peer critiques to help with revision, they reinforce the knowledge making that the students create and
maintain together. Similarly, the members of Protagonize consistently work together, through the writing they create collaboratively to the comments they leave one another on different writing projects to the discussions that happen within different writing circles, to revise and reaffirm certain types of knowledge specific to their community.

*Writing Workshops*

Within composition studies and pedagogical practices, the student writing workshop or peer critique group is well researched and practiced, with some of the benefits including students gaining a better understanding of the writing process, the rhetorical situation, and revision strategies (Bruffee, “Collaborative;” Dale, Co-authoring). However, when writing workshops are incorporated in most composition classrooms, they usually occur only periodically throughout the semester, rather than as a sustained practice. To get a better understanding of workshop models that are used continuously throughout a course, it is necessary to turn to the research on creative writing workshops, which incorporate a workshop-model as a key component of weekly or even daily classroom pedagogical practices. The scholarship on the workshop model as it is used in university creative writing is divided, with some arguing that it can still be an effective model (Harper, “Foreword;” Leahy, “Teaching;” St. John, “Teaching”) while others believe that creative writing instructors do not critically reflect enough on their method of workshopping (Donnelly, “Introduction;” Vanderslice, “Once More”). Dianne Donnelly believes that an important question about creative writing workshops that should, but has not been, asked is, what else is possible in the creative writing workshop space? Many creative writing instructors simply replicate the types of workshops that they experienced as either an undergraduate or graduate student, with little consideration
about the ways in which these copycat models may not be effective for the kinds of students in the workshop. Donnelly believes that instructors should instead consider the potential gains to the workshop model by taking advantage of its flexibility as a teaching tool. Writing workshops conducted online, and in particular those that use a SNS platform, may be additionally useful in reimagining the possibilities for traditional writing workshops when trying to meet the needs of a diverse student body.

Graeme Harper, who does believe that the writing workshop is still a useful pedagogical tool for creative writing classrooms, simply believes that instructors should readjust their understanding of it. Instead of seeing the texts being workshopped as the end result of a series of actions, creative writing instructors need to relearn to see that “the creative writing workshop is itself an event, a significant site of human action” (xvi). Harper emphasizes the need to approach the workshop as a place of intense interaction between individuals. Although he does not use the word “collaborative” specifically, he implies that the act of collaboration, as a “site of human action,” should be the focus of social interactions that instructors and students of workshops should focus on rather than the end product that comes from the workshop. In other words, he suggests learning to see the writing workshop and its inherent social quality as an important step in the creation of a text. An important question he poses is, what do we value about writing workshops and why? While it may be that the creation and discussion of texts is an integral part of the creative writing workshop, as well as the composition workshop, it is equally important to recognize the social ties that develop within the workshop environment and how these ties lead to more useful collaboration and even community formation in the classroom. As Bruffee discusses, collaborative learning permits
community knowledge to come into being, and only through close community
collections can writers better learn effective ways of composing.

Writing workshops, in composition and creative writing classroom settings, I
believe aim to strengthen the importance of audience within the writing process, to give
student writers someone else to compose for, even if their peers will not be the final
audience they will write for; it is the awareness of writing for others that becomes
important, an awareness that allows emphasis on writing’s inherent social characteristics.
In other words, what writing workshops allow for is the creation of Johnson’s notion of
“authorial pleasure,” or the experience of connection between writers and readers. The
potential use of SNSs within writing classrooms, especially those that include some kind
of writing workshop, should be considered as valid for the technology’s ability to make
clear what Harper identifies as “significant site[s] of human action,” or what could also
be called, using Bowman’s term, sites of “interactional activity.” Social network sites
demonstrate for students the importance of connection within the writing process, of
establishing relationships with other writers so they can understand writing as, at its core,
an activity centered on human action. Protagonize, then, is an excellent test site to
observe how the members, all voluntary in their participation on the site, use writing to
form connections and relationships with other members. Protagonize members regularly
seek out and form connections with other members through a variety of ways supported
by the site’s SNS design: through group discussion boards, member profiles and
comments, and comments on other members’ published creative work. These interactions
range from specific critiques of creative work, such as pointing out character flaws or
plot holes, to more general praise of work, to more casual and conversational
communication. All of these types of communication regularly happen in classroom settings, but I believe these types of interactions to be under-emphasized in scholarship for their potential to create communities of writers where the student writers learn to experience writing as a pleasurable, playful source of human connection. If Protagonize members can experience play, pleasure, and connection through their collaborative writing practices, then similar methods could also be incorporated into college writing classrooms.

**SNSs, Play, Collaboration and Protagonize**

Protagonize.com, as a site that emphasizes not only collaborative creative writing but also forming communities of writers, is not only an appropriate object of study for this project, but also simply an interesting site to see how people voluntarily write for fun. It is useful to provide some brief context here for how the site functions as a SNS and what this designation means for the writing members do on the site. Protagonize adheres to boyd and Ellison's definition of a social network site. Members of the site are encouraged to create a profile, complete with an avatar of their choosing, and can fill out optional information that gives other users a more complete idea of the type of person the member wishes to present herself as. Protagonize, however, appears different than other “ego-centered” or individual-centered SNSs (boyd and Ellison 210). While there is certainly a focus on the individual within the site — the profile ‘stage’ is all about a particular member, her thoughts, opinions, likes/dislikes, friends, etc. — within the site as a whole, that “ego-centered” structure has the potential to shift into a “group-centered” structure. The groups and especially the collaboratively-written creative pieces demonstrate a desire to cohere and create multiple voices rather than focus on just one. In
this way, the writing the members do on the site takes on the sense of connections members experience with one another.

A unique feature of Protagonize as a SNS is that, unlike other SNSs such as Facebook, where users strengthen offline connections in the online environment, members of this site make contact with others *whom they do not know offline*. This sets Protagonize apart from more common and popular forms of SNSs, where “participants are not necessarily ‘networking’ or looking to meet new people; instead, they are primarily communicating with people who are already a part of their extended social network” (boyd and Ellison 211). This is not, then, a site where members display connections they have offline, in real life. In some ways, Protagonize creates an online environment that is much more about networking, or meeting others who enjoy writing. Not knowing someone (at first) can actually be useful when writing and being a part of a writing community. When you do not know someone personally, you will be more open in your critique of his or her writing. But the site’s emphasis on “group-centered” activity makes it far more likely that a member will be able to be productive on the site, and have fun through their communication on the site, because it is not just about the one individual user. Protagonize is about what the individual member can bring to the larger group.

Through the making of and establishing of a variety of different connections, through various forms of communication throughout the site, including group discussion board activity and collaboratively writing together, members have the potential to create a variety of writing relationships and friendships. These friendships, in turn, are productive because they allow for the members to write together, to form communities of
writers that both help and encourage one another in their efforts. While one of the stated goals in general of the site is to attract real writing groups who meet offline, this is not a necessary requirement of the user when he first joins. It is more likely that the user will become a member of one or more Protagonize communities naturally through participation and interaction with others on the site.

When looking more broadly at SNSs, there appears to be several important connections between their characteristics and the social characteristics of play as Huizinga describes them (play being a voluntary activity taking place in a set time and place with rules agreed upon by the participants and being outside of regular life). SNSs, like play, are voluntary activities. No one is made to create a Facebook profile; one does so, perhaps, in order to keep in touch with others online, therefore giving SNSs a distinction of being “outside of ‘ordinary’ or ‘real life.’” All SNSs provide alternative spaces for users to go to as an escape from the real life activities and responsibilities they must do. Often, when users are checking their Facebook or other SNS accounts, they become “absorbed” in the activity, again like play does for the player. Participating in a SNS has no “material gain” to give the user, only the gain of reinforced social connections. SNSs bring order and rules to the space, as does play, and all interactions that happen on SNSs have a “limitedness” to them. However, through participation in SNSs, communities and connections are created and maintained, even after the users have logged off the site, creating a sense of continuity even when the users are not logged on to the site. Finally, just as players wish to “stress their difference from the ‘ordinary’ world” by donning disguises or masks, members of SNSs often have the choice of presenting different images or avatars to ‘stand-in’ for them online.
**Research Questions**

What will drive this project are the types of interactions that occur on Protagonize and how these various types of member interactions (collaborative writing, commenting, group formation, critiquing) influence writing practices and collaboration on the site. All of these interactions suggest a further blurring of traditional roles of writer/reader, as members have the potential to always be both. Additionally, these roles are not static and isolated but constantly shifting and moving. This leads to a more playful environment for writing to take place, one that does not focus solely on the end product but rather on all the stages of composition. More explicitly on Protagonize than perhaps on other social network sites is the fluid, lived quality of the texts as the readers and writers respond to one another and change their writing because of the interactions. Most important of all, then, is the way in which this site makes clear the impact of social connections between users in their abilities to collaboratively write and experience play and pleasure in the writing process. My research questions, then, address how these social, active roles impact members’ writing practices and how an understanding of the extent to which the social roles positively enhance the pleasure of members’ experience of writing may better assist instructors teaching of writing. A summative question that will guide this study, then, will be:

1. What can the Protagonize.com community contribute to academic understandings of connection in collaborative writing and writing groups as well as to individuals' self-motivated writing?
2. What does the Protagonize.com community contribute to more general understandings of writing practices, particularly of understandings of the playful or ludic nature of writing, or how adult writers play writing games?

Some sub-questions are:

1. How does connection form on Protagonize through the different types of writing members do on the site?

2. How do new members of Protagonize.com learn how to write on the site, and how do different types of collaboration aid in this learning process?

3. How does the writing workshop, or more broadly writing groups, change outside of the classroom setting? How do non-academic, self-sponsored writers write on Protagonize?

**Research Methodology**

*Introduction*

The methodology that appears most appropriate for this project will be what Robert Kozinets defines as “netnography.” Netnography is “participant-observational research based in online fieldwork” (60). Netnographic inquiry is a specialized form of ethnographic research for the study of social phenomenon in the digital/virtual context of the Internet. It utilizes many aspects of traditional ethnography and provides an understanding of a community, its members, and how the community functions. Because of its emphasis on learning social practices and their meanings, netnographic inquiry involves immersive participant observation. Like ethnography, netnography can include interviews and surveys of community members.
As an outgrowth of traditional ethnographic inquiry, netnography shares many of its features. Let me highlight some. Dick Hobbs defines ethnography as “a cocktail of methodologies that share the assumption that personal engagement with the subject is the key to understanding a particular culture or social setting” (qtd. in Kozinets 59). One way to achieve this is by creating a deep, descriptive understanding of the social world. Because of its emphasis on description, ethnography is an inherently flexible method, often drawing from and including a variety of other methods, such as discourse analysis, visual analysis and various types of interviewing. Focusing on personal and prolonged engagement with social phenomenon, emphasizing description, being inherently flexible and multi-moded are some of the key ways netnography is very similar to traditional ethnography. There are important differences, however.

One of the major differences between traditional ethnographic work and netnography is the time and resources involved in data collection. Indeed, one of the major benefits of netnography is that it uses publicly available information that can be found within the “fieldsites” that the researcher chooses to work in. In that regard, netnography has a distinct advantage over more traditional ethnographic study, in that the netnographer need only visit the website or forum that she has selected to study, although a potential drawback of this approach is the need to observe the community for a longer period of time in order to be able to establish patterns and rules of conduct throughout the community or to notice how the fluidity of the online site allows for patterns and rules to change as new users join the community. This ease of access to the community of study allows for more consistent in-depth data collection and analysis over a prolonged period of time. Interviews and surveys can be conducted electronically, either synchronously or
asynchronously. Furthermore, there is a possibility for netnography to be conducted in a minimally intrusive manner, unlike more classic, immersive in-person ethnographic research.

**The Process of Netnographic Study**

The process for undertaking a netnographic inquiry begins with first identifying a research topic—e.g. collaborative creative writing—and then creating research questions that are broad enough to thoroughly explore the topic. Following the establishment of a topic and the initial research questions, it becomes necessary for the researcher to identify appropriate digital communities that would provide the most useful sites of analysis. Generally, there are a variety of sites to choose from including blogs, wikis, and social media sites. These sites of analysis should allow the researcher to gather useful data in order to best answer the research questions. Kozinets advises that the researcher should consider several qualities of online sites when narrowing down which will provide the best data to answer the research questions. These qualities include relevance, activity, interactivity, and how heterogeneous and data-rich they are (89). Relevance refers to how related the site of study is to the researcher’s topic and question. Activity means how active the site users are, emphasizing that if a particular site does not get much daily or even weekly activity, it may not produce enough data to be useful for the project. Interactivity refers to how much the members communicate with others on the site. So, like activity, if users of a site do not appear to have much interaction with each other, it may not be the best site to use as a research community. Finally, Kozinets suggests that netnographers pay attention to how heterogeneous the site and its community is. If it appears that only a few participants actively post on the site only once a week, and not
with an intent to engage the others, then the site may not provide the rich, useful data for a netnographic project.

Once the researcher has identified particular sites that have many of these qualities, then she can make her entry. Kozinets suggests that before the researcher makes her presence and intentions known to the community, she should thoroughly research the community through its Frequently Asked Questions (FAQ) page and archives to become more familiar with the site, its community, and its practices. This familiarity may allow members to feel more comfortable with the researcher’s presence.

After the researcher has introduced herself to the community, she then continues to have an active role in the community, one determined by the researcher ahead of time. So, she may decide, for example, to be an active member of the community, participating fully in regular activities, as do other community members. Data collection begins after this sustained planning and observation stage. Even if a large majority of the data come from archives, the researcher must always strive to “understand the people represented in these interactions from within the online communal and cultural context in which they are embedded, rather than to collect information in a way that would strip out context and present culture members or their practices in a general, unspecified, universalized manner” (Kozinets 96).

When collecting data it is important for the researcher keep thorough fieldnotes to record her reflections rather than simple observations. The researcher’s reflections demonstrate her movement from outsider to insider in regards to the community she studies. Reflective fieldnotes allow the researcher to “decipher the reasons behind cultural actions, rather than offer the more typical recording or description of them”
As much as possible, the netnographer should record her fieldnotes contemporaneously with the interactive online social experiences because in this way she can better understand the more subtle aspects of socialization and acculturation that occur as they happen.

Kozinets’ final consideration is for ethical concerns of conducting research on the chosen site. Because of the nature of this project, which includes collecting and analyzing writing done by members of Protagonize, I needed to receive Institutional Review Board permission from Case Western Reserve University to conduct research, which I did in August of 2012\(^4\). I needed to explain that my project would not cause any harm to any of the members of the site, whose work I would be collecting for my data analysis. Because all of the writing done on Protagonize is available to the general public, I did not anticipate any harm would come to the site’s members. I did post a letter to the main group from which I collected my data, Collaborative Corner, explaining the project, what I would be doing on the site, the kind of data I planned to collect, how I would analyze that data, and what I hoped to achieve. I gave any member the option to email me to opt out of my project. I had three members email me to do so, so none of their writings appear in the data set.

Data/Object of Study

As Kozinets stresses in his definition and explanation of netnography, the role of the netnographer is to study the groupings of people or communities on the Internet. Particular communities studied will not, of course, include every individual who may be interested in a particular topic (such as collaborative creative writing). However, the

\(^4\) Case Western Reserve University IRB approval # IRB-2012-277.
selected community for study will form a coherent group for research purposes, because
of the publicly accessible communications that occur on a specific website on the web.

When a netnographer collects data, it is impossible for her to do so without also
analyzing that data. As she selects her data, she will begin to think about patterns and
commonalities among the data set as a whole. For analyzing the data collected in a
netnographic study, the researcher uses an inductive approach, which allows her to
extrapolate from a large body of data individual observations, which can be developed
into more general statements about a specific phenomenon. Part of the process of data
analysis involves coding the data, which means classifying units of the data as examples
of a larger phenomenon. Coding categories develop through inductive close reading of
the data and later identifying interesting and useful patterns.

There are two types of data collected by the netnographer: “archival” and
“elicited.” Archival data includes anything already written and publicly accessible on the
site, such as comments on creative work or posts in a group discussion board thread.
Elicited data includes information gathered when the researcher solicits members of the
site to answer surveys or participate in personal interviews. When wanting to collect
elicited data, Kozinets suggests that the researcher should post to relevant discussion
boards, making the posts appear similar to postings of other community members while
also being open about the researcher’s intentions about the research she wishes to
conduct.

For this project, I collected a variety of data (see Table 1), ranging from
discussion board posts on Collaborative Corner to member comments on the
collaboratively-written story “Ten.” Information about the site, its creation, its goals, how
to get the most out of the site, and how to be a considerate member I also gathered from a variety of pages under the “FAQ” section and the “About” section, as well as the “Help” and “Getting Started” pages. All of this data is considered archival, as it was already published when I set out to collect data on the site. Given the wide variety of data read and collected, which provides a detailed picture of activity and member interactions on the site from August 2009 through January 2011, I chose not to collect elicited data at this time, though I believe that doing so in the future would provide an even more complete picture regarding members’ writing practices, their attitudes toward play and pleasure when writing, their attitudes toward collaborative writing, and their thoughts about using SNSs for writing more generally.

**Table 1: Protagonize Data Collection Overview**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Pages Consulted about General Information and Activity on Protagonize</th>
<th>“Help;” “Getting Started;” “FAQ;” and “About”</th>
</tr>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Number of Collaborative Corner Boards read</td>
<td>213; dates August 5, 2009 – March 24, 2010</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Number of Member Profiles reviewed</td>
<td>35</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Number of Pages in “Ten” creative work</td>
<td>34; dates April 18, 2010 – January 11, 2011</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Number of Comments for “Ten” creative work</td>
<td>148</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The method used for analyzing and coding the collected data involves the process discussed by Robert Emerson, Rachel Fretz, and Linda Shaw in *Writing Ethnographic Fieldnotes*. They recommend including analytical coding of the fieldnotes along with the close reflections done while reading through the notes. Open analytical coding is done on a line-by-line basis throughout the notes as a means to identify any ideas, themes, or issues the notes suggest. A priori analytical coding is done when the researcher
establishes the specific topics or themes she wishes to read the notes for. For this project, I began with a priori analytical coding approach to the data, looking for themes such as “connection,” “friendship,” “community,” “encouragement,” and “play.” However, as I collected and started to analyze the data, I also used open analytical coding schemes because I came across themes and patterns I had not anticipated in my preparation, such as genres (like science-fiction and fantasy). Using both coding methods was useful because it allowed me to identify important patterns in the member activity but in a way that was flexible and more accurately and authentically represented the kind of activity I was observing from the members.

*Personal Experiences as a Protagonize Member-Researcher*

When I first began searching for a site to study for this project, I came across many sites that function as writing workshops online. Members upload their writing and other members critique it. Some of these sites provide very clear directions about the kind of feedback members should give to one another, and while studying the way writers communicate with one another was of interest to me, I wanted to study a site where writing actually happened online. When I discovered Protagonize, I realized that this was the perfect site to study: not only did the site act as a writing community, where members could, if they wanted to, meet others to give and receive critiques on their own creative work, but the site actively encouraged members to write together. The collaborative creative writing aspect of the site intrigued me. Collaborative creative writing has a long history, dating back to the twelfth century Japan. It continued into the twentieth and twenty-first centuries with chain poets in New York City, the Beats, the New York School poets, and feminist poetry in the 1970s (Duhamel, Seaton and Trinidad,
“Introduction”). In my own creative writing classes, I would often use exercises that would ask students to collaborate on pieces. But for studying how writers write together online, Protagonize offered an excellent community, one that appeared very active with lots of members writing together and talking about writing together.

I initially made contact with the site creator Nick Bouton during the summer of 2012. By the time I first emailed him, I had explored a lot of the site. I read the current highest-rated creative writing and looked through discussion boards for a few site groups, including New Members and Collaborative Corner. I had also read through members’ profile pages to see what kinds of information they included and what kinds of writing they had done and liked to do. I signed up for my own member profile and filled it out with my own reading and writing interests. I also chose a real picture of me for my avatar and a username that was my own real name: nmemmelhainz. I did this so I would not hide my identity as a researcher, but I also wanted to give interested members information about my own writing habits and preferences.

After receiving permission from Bouton to conduct research on the site, I choose which part of the site I wanted to collect data from: Collaborative Corner. I choose this group because its purpose was to bring members together who wanted to write collaborative creative works. This group acted as a forum for members to pitch story ideas to others and actively seek out others to write with. I composed a thread on the Collaborative Corner discussion board, introducing myself, my project, and briefly explaining what I intended to do. I explained that I would be collecting data in the form of discussion board threads posted on the site, and I would change all usernames to pseudonyms to help protect members’ privacy (though, again, all writing is freely
available to anybody with an Internet connection). I gave my university-affiliated email in this introduction and asked that any member who would prefer to be left out of the study email me. I received requests from three members to not use their writing in my study, requests I honored by selecting only threads these individual did not participate in.

In addition to restricting my data to threads where those who opted-out did not appear, I also decided to choose from threads that were posted between October 2009 and April 2010. I choose this six-month period for several reasons. First, the Collaborative Corner group was created by Bouton August 1, 2009, so members would be figuring out exactly what the parameters of the group were at this time. I thought this would make for more robust discussions between members as they learned how to use the group to make connections with other members who wanted to write collaboratively. I also wanted threads that had been completed, so no new posts would appear while I was completing my analysis. I read through the first ten pages of discussion board threads, which equaled 250 unique threads. Not all of these threads, though, would be useful for my project. Many of them were members asking other members to read and critique their work. Because I was more interested in how members write together on the site, these threads were not appropriate. Some of the threads that were posted to gather members to write together only had a couple replies and were sometimes discussions between just two members. In order to make my data more robust, I decided to select threads that had a minimum of nine comments by at least three different members. Finally, given the parameters of my IRB project, I could not use threads that had contributions by persons under the age of 18, so this also eliminated several threads from my data set.
From my readings of the approximately fifty threads from this six-month period, I learned much about the nature of the site and its members. New members, who often would label themselves as such, using phrasing such as “I’m pretty new here,” or “I’ve never written a collaboration but I want to,” were treated with respect and enthusiastically welcomed into the community. More experienced members would happily discuss the way in which collaborations worked on the site, and how to get the most out of being a Protagonize member. Members who used Collaborative Corner to pitch ideas for collaborative story telling were often excited about their ideas and showed equal excitement when other members would share their ideas with them. I visited the profile pages of the members who were posting to Collaborative Corner threads during this time period to get a sense of who they were and what they liked to write. Frequently, these members were incredibly active, with lots of activity on the site in the form of stories and comments to others. They had many member friends on the site, too, who had left comments on their profile pages. I never came across any negative criticism or mean-spirited commentary, though I did find on one member profile a declaration that she was not going to participate on the site any longer because she believed her work had been stolen by someone else. While I could not read through all the thousands of profiles, group discussion board threads, and creative works and their comments, I did get a sense from what I did read and analyze that these members seemed very happy and excited simply to be working in a community that focused on something they clearly loved.

5 Whether this thief was another Protagonize member or someone else who had found the individual’s work while browsing the site is unclear. This member who made the accusation of someone stealing her writing she had published on the site did not state explicitly whom she believed to have stolen her work; her profile was empty except for this declaration and her profile picture.
These members showed a particular attitude towards writing that I wanted to help foster in my students. The more I read through discussion board threads, profile comments, and creative works on the site, the more I came to understand that the Protagonize community allowed for the members to develop such a positive, supportive attitude about writing. Writing here was not a chore or something to be feared; it was a pleasure, and the community connections members had with one another made it a pleasure. While particular characteristics of the site, such as “Recommended works” and “Popular works” may appear like a rewards-and-punishment system, in fact, they reaffirm the community-centeredness of the site. The more a Protagonize writer makes connections with other writers, the more she comments on others’ creative works and seeks out collaborative opportunities, the more others will respond to her. The way the site uses the platform of social networking creates an online atmosphere where members encourage one another, through positive, playful, and insightful conversation and collaboration, to be writers. Finding ways to create a similar atmosphere in college-level composition and creative writing courses would benefit students as they would not only become better writers, but they would realize writing’s power to form deep connections with others.

These site-specific terms will be explained in more detail in Chapter 1 of this work.
Chapter 1: ISO a Writing Friend: Protagonize as a Space for Playful Collaborative Writing

“The pleasure I felt was a sign of my intrinsic motivation. I had moments of composing that felt pleasurable, that I did for their own sake. This sense is important to play, because a playful approach cannot thrive when the composer is primarily focused on external rewards and punishments. There must be pleasure in the thing itself, in the process, and in the collaboration.” — Albert Rouzie, *At Play in the Fields of Writing*

“Okay, we all have those moments where we're writing, then look back at our work and say, ‘Holy marshmallow on a stick... That's good!’ You know, you were just moving that pencil along the page or typing away, and a wonderful sentence just appears out of nowhere that you're really proud of. Poetry. Beauty. Awesome.” — Judy, a Protagonize.com member

What can a sense of pleasure and play do for a writer? How does collaboratively writing with others enhance the pleasure and play of the writing process, from brainstorming to final revisions? Albert Rouzie and Protagonize member Judy begin to answer these questions. Rouzie believes that the experience of pleasure and the act of writing are highly intertwined within one another, and when a writer feels a sense of pleasure, she will write more, and therefore continue to experience more pleasure. Writing in this way becomes a reciprocal process, and when the writing is done with others, it creates the context that Johnson describes as being ideal for writers to work, a sweeping away of vague haziness and jarring starts and stops in the act of composing. While it may still be necessary for writers to learn how to periodically and artificially create these circumstances to give their writing more direction and purpose, with current
digital technologies, in particular social network site (SNS) platforms, writers can now choose to immerse themselves in virtual environments with other writers and an audience. They cannot only have the “feeling of a reply to an interlocutor who is immediately present,” but they can write with the knowledge that the interlocutor is actually there. Judy, in her original post on the Collaborative Corner group thread, “Quote Yourself!,” understands both the concept of pleasure as a motivating factor in the writing process, and the usefulness of sharing and celebrating these moments with other writers. When she initiates this conversation with other members of the group, inviting them to share their favorite lines they have written, she calls attention to not only the great joy of writing something wonderful and surprising, but how that joy can be increased for both the writer and her readers through the simple act of sharing.

Protagonize, through its SNS platform, creates an online space in which writers can cultivate collaborative writing relationships and begin to experience more pleasure in the act of writing as they connect with others. Members can make connections through SNS features such as the comment sections for creative work, the group discussion boards, or even each user’s profile page. These interactions are often highly playful in their tone and content, a consequence, I believe, of both play and pleasure being attitudes that members take on within their interactions on the site. This playful tone can be observed as members frequently joke around with each other or offer enthusiastic, sometimes humorous, encouragement. For example, on the “Quote Yourself!” thread, when one of the members, Eric, quotes from one of his stories without giving any context for the quote, another member, Nancy, suggest that he provide some background so those unfamiliar can understand his quote. Eric’s reply to Nancy, “Hokay, thanks for the
pointers there! I fix imminently … XD,” shows his appreciation for Nancy’s idea. His use of the word, “Hokay,” which suggests a funny, heavily-accented “Okay” and the extreme-smiley emoticon all suggest a playful, friendly attitude. Eric is not offended by Nancy’s suggestion; on the contrary, his response and his editing of his original post to reflect her suggestions show he is happy she is interacting with him and taking an interest in his writing. Frequently, Protagonize member communication shows their reciprocal interest in each other’s writing in this way.

This type of communication that emphasizes play and pleasure is not new, however, to writing, storytelling, or even reading. This chapter will briefly trace the history of Protagonize.com’s predecessors, such as the Choose-Your-Own-Adventure story series, and how these books engaged readers and writers in the process of creating stories. The site’s goals and objectives will then be overviewed, along with a discussion of how the use of specific SNS platform features allow for the site’s administrators to better meet their goals. Protagonize’s members will be profiled, as will the different ways in which they can communicate with others. Communications become vital to the analysis of the members’ interactions with one another and form the basis for the strong connections that allow for writing communities to form on the site.

**Early Influences: Protagonize.com’s Predecessors**

The influences for Protagonize can be traced to earlier forms of immersive, interactive collaborative storytelling. An early type of media to emphasize fun and game-like play of storytelling was the gamebook, which relies heavily on reader participation and contains narrative branches that may not be linear. Jorge Luis Borges’s short story *The Garden of Forking Paths* is considered to be an early example of a gamebook.
Published in 1941, the story contains multiple endings, and according to Noah Wardrip-Fruin and Nick Montfort, is one of the first examples of a hypertext novel (New Media Reader 29). In the 1950s, educators developed branching-path textbooks, designed to help students learn independently, without an instructor. The work of literary experimenters, such as the Oulipo group and John Sladek, also present some forms of non-linear, reader-participant storytelling. The most relevant work for Protagonize with this kind of storytelling, though, and the best-known gamebooks, began in the mid-1970s, with the publication of the first Choose Your Own Adventure (CYOA) book.

Originally created by Edward Packard, the CYOA series offered young readers (the books were written for readers ages 10-14) the chance to direct the course of the story’s narrative by offering them several narrative choices to select from. For example, if a CYOA book was about a knight going to slay a dragon, the reader would be given the choice, after the introduction of the key plot and characters, to decide what the knight would do, such as “Stay in the tavern,” or “Go to the enchanted forest.” This kind of participatory storytelling became very successful, with the height of its popularity peaking in the 1980s and the change of publishers from the smaller presses Vermont Crossroads Books and Pocket Books to the larger Bantam Books. Though the series concluded in 1998, its run consisted of 185 books, as well as several spin-off series. Many of the spin-off series focused more on educational purposes, such as effective decision-making. But the core of the original series, as well as other related series such as Role-Playing gamebooks and Adventure gamebooks, was entertainment, fun, and pleasure for the reader. An important and unique narrative design element of these books was the game-like quality, in which, much like other role-playing games like Dungeons
and Dragons (a contemporary of the CYOA series) or popular video games today like *Skyrim*, the reader/player’s decisions set in motion the narrative. The ability to immerse the reader in the act of reading through such decision-making processes made the experience of reading interactive. The reader could understand the choices she was making and the consequences that followed. These qualities made the books highly enjoyable for young readers, as they differed so dramatically from the traditional, linear stories they may have been used to reading.

The rise of computer technology throughout the 1980s and early 1990s led to the evolution in the form, scope, and audience for these gamebooks and other forms of collaborative storytelling. In the late 1980s, Allen Firstenberg developed Addventure storytelling, an interactive hypertext fiction inspired by the CYOA series. Like those books, Addventure narratives were non-linear, began with an initial story called the root, and contained multiple branches stemming off the root node. Unlike the printed book series, early computer-networked electronic communication, such as USENET and bulletin boards, allowed for many writers and readers to collaborate on these stories and their branches. With the online context and the connectivity it afforded users, then, the potential for fun and play between the readers and text became heightened because now the readers could enhance their participation through the act of writing. This also allowed for communities of writers and readers to form online around the creation of these stories. Creativity became heightened as it was collaboratively completed and acknowledged through these online communities of writers.

In these communities, the writers could actively work together with others to develop the stories. This collaboration heightened the enjoyment of the experience of the
story because the readers/writers knew they were contributing to the entertainment of the larger community of readers/writers. As Johnson believes, this ability to connect with an “interlocutor who is immediately present” is important for writers in order to create a type of writing experience that is pleasurable (30). Though Johnson does not make the connection, the cyclical nature of pleasurable writing practices — writers connecting to actual audiences, those audiences responding to the writers, the writers writing more in response to the audiences — also reaffirms an important lesson in the teaching writing: understanding writing as a conversation, as Kenneth Burke discusses it. This metaphor calls attention to the fundamentally social nature of writing, but this metaphor is made explicit in the collaborative writing of texts online, like the Addventure stories. What becomes interesting for the writer working in a collaborative-writing environment, like the Addventure story, is that she is both a writer and reader simultaneously, and thus can experience the writing from the reader’s perspective while she writers. This creates an additional dimension of play, as the act of writing takes on a more game-like quality as writers may compete (perhaps deliberately, perhaps inadvertently) with one another to create the most exciting or tragic branch in the story. Competition or not, the fun these writers experience in the act of composing a story together demonstrate that writing can not only be pleasurable, but a large part of the pleasure experienced by writers comes directly from the connections they make with others through their writing. This does not make writing a means to an end; on the contrary, the connections Protagonize members (and other writers who have made similar kinds of connections with other writers and readers) make with others enhance the pleasure experienced from the writing itself.

Protagonize.com: Collaborative Writing Meets Social Networking
Protagonize’s Goals

Like the CYOA stories and the Addventure stories that came before, Protagonize wants to create for its users a kind of collaborative writing environment where the connections made between writers makes the act of writing highly pleasurable. In this kind of writing space, one that focuses on how writers work together to tell stories, writing becomes like a game and one in which the writers and their audiences can become immersed in its playing. However, through its use of specific social network site (SNS) platform characteristics, such as comment features, group discussion boards, and user profiles, the immersion goes further to include ways of strengthening the sense of community that can grow in the online space. Many of Protagonize’s goals as a collaborative creative writing community are enhanced through its use of SNS features, goals which include many of the writing habits that writers need to adapt in order to become more productive and happy composers.

The principle goals for the site include providing a space that allows its members to compose more writing and helping to bring focus to the act of writing (as it is done on the site) itself. Precisely, members of Protagonize are encouraged to collaborate with other members throughout all stages of the writing process, and to build writing relationships with others so as to work together more frequently. As the site’s “FAQ” page explains, Protagonize is a “creative writing community dedicated to writing in a variety of formats within a friendly, supportive environment. Our authors participate in both solo and collaborative works ranging from short stories and interactive fiction-style addventures to collaborative novels, poetry, writing exercises, creative writing competitions, and a number of other types of writing.” On the “About” page, its roots in Addventure-style
storytelling become clear. When the site originally launched in late 2007, its goal was to revive the art of Addventure-style writing, filling in the gap left open with the demise of Snoot.com and other similar Addventure sites. However, after receiving user feedback, the site was soon expanded to include the linear or “standard” stories as well as the non-linear, branched stories. This change “allowed the site to attract a much broader community of authors looking to hone and refine their creative talents” (“About”). While playful and game-like types of writing together still happen on the site, as it did with other types of earlier Addventure fiction, Protagonize members have many more options for different kinds of collaboration, which not only adds to the writers’ enjoyment while writing on the site, but also helps to add to the growing community knowledge, building users’ understanding of how to be writers within the Protagonize community.

Broadening the member-base for the site was particularly important as its creator, Nick Bouton, wanted Protagonize’s design to stress the possibilities for collaborative work and the types of connections users could form with one another. As the “About” page explains, Bouton wanted to incorporate elements of the more user-friendly Web 2.0 to improve the older collaborative fiction writing models like Snoot.com:

The old web-based collaborative fiction implementations were always a lot of fun, but were either critically flawed or generally lacking in a variety of ways. Snoot.com was uncontrolled and organic. There was no moderation of any shape or form, and people tended to run amok, causing havoc and generally enjoying themselves in a chaotic sort of way. Protagonize began as an attempt to modernize the collaborative creative writing arena and inject a little Web 2.0 love to produce a better, more usable interface. Mix an underlying social network and that’s where we stand today.

A benefit of the SNS platform features used in the design of Protagonize is these features help to eliminate chaotic types of interactions between the members. In particular, non-members have no way of interacting with the members of the site; they cannot contribute
any type of writing to the site, and are limited to only reading the writing done by members. This is one of the main benefits of signing up for an account. Once a user creates a membership account, they can do the following: publish their own original fiction and poetry, participate in writing exercises, promote their writing to a broad audience of users and members from all over the globe, have conversations about writing and technique and interact with other members in a variety of groups and collaborative projects, and follow and be followed by other members of the community (“FAQ”). All these activities reinforce the ultimate goal of Protagonize, to create a community of writers, interested in sustaining relationships with one another and enjoying the act of writing together.

Common Activity on the Site

Though every user has a different level of activity on the site, there are several common types of activity on Protagonize. Members will often leave comments on other members’ profile pages, to which these members, in turn, can respond back to on their friends’ profile pages. These comments range in content, from brief, simple greetings to longer explications on ideas or stories they may be working on together. Like other SNSs such as Facebook, the comments on each member’s profile page cover an incredibly wide-range of topics, and all comments suggest larger attempts to maintain friendships and communities with others on the site. Members may also leave responses on group threads they are currently active on, or they may begin new threads on any of the boards they are members of. Depending on the group, these discussion board threads also contain many conceivable topics, from general questions regarding the site to more
specific ideas about collaborative stories being written, to again, friendly greetings and conversational small talk that act as social cues to build relationships.

Members also can read others’ creative publications or write and publish their own creative works. These creative works include collaboratively- and individually-written pieces of short and long fiction, non-fiction, poetry, and writing exercises. Protagonize members also have the option to leave comments on every creative work published on the site, with the content of these comments including praise to the author/s, critiques that help the author/s revise the work, to notes from the author/s to the readers, the better help their audience understand what they are trying to do with the piece. Much like the comments on member profiles and responses on group discussion board threads, these comments on the creative works, while also aiming to help the authors with their writing (even if it is just through general encouragement) are also meant to help build a larger sense of community. Overall, much of the activity on Protagonize has this goal: to bring members together through their love and appreciation of writing, to help them learn to become better writers, to help them write more, and to make friends while writing.

**Protagonize’s Layout and SNS Features**

But how do the SNS features and the site’s format and organization promote these types of member interactions? For members and users familiar with other SNSs, such as Facebook, Protagonize is fairly easy to navigate. While nearly every page, from each member profile to each thread contributed on a group discussion board, has a link to it, there are several main pages that members encounter in their use of the site. To begin an overview of the features of the site, I will focus on the Homepage and the kinds of

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7 Chapters 2 and 3 will focus in more depth on discussion board threads from the Collaborative Corner group.
information it provides for both members and non-members, including a variety of links to the major sections of the site: Read, Authors, Groups, and Profiles.

Homepage

According to the “Getting Started” page, the Homepage “serves as an aggregator of all sorts of interesting site information, from the current most recommended and popular works, to the most frequently used tags, to recent activity. Clicking any item title will take you to that work or page. Clicking a tag or category heading will take you to a list of works in that category, or tagged with that keyword.” Like other SNSs, Protagonize’s Homepage highlights members and their recent activity on the site. When a user opens the Homepage, she sees a variety of information and options, many of which direct and enhance her experience and ability to connect with other members of the site. Even the Protagonize logo, a lime green lightning bolt surrounded by a dark green circle, suggests the spark of ideas, electricity that can build the more a member participates and engages with others on the site. The name itself gives the impression of activity and energy. The base of the name — protagonist — comes from the Greek and means the first or principle actor. Much creative writing, of course, will include a protagonist to center the plot of the story. But what is interesting about the site’s name is the addition of the verb suffix -ize. This creates a verb out of the noun that signifies a subject who is about to undergo a specific action. “Protagonize,” then, as a name gives the impression that each member will be brought in as a key player within the site, as a writer, a reader, a collaborator, and finally a participant and community members in various ways throughout the site.

Directly below the logo is the site’s main menu bar. It includes the homepage link (the logo itself, which appears in the top left corner of every page on the site, also acts as
a homepage link), the member sign-up page as well as links that direct users to the
“Write,” “Explore,” and “Activity” pages, all three of which have drop-down menus that
offer a variety of options. The “Write” tab opens the page where members can begin to
create a new piece of work (and if the user is not a registered member, the page prompts
her to sign up). The “Explore” tab offers three categories: “Read,” “Authors,” and
“Groups.” Again, each of these options provides a variety of choices for users to select.
Under “Read,” which is described as giving users “a bird's-eye view of the most popular
works on the site,” the selections include options to browse each type of work published
on the site (“Getting Started”). A new user may find the links for the “Most
Recommended” and “Top Rated” of particular interest, as Protagonize members’ usage
within the site determine these categories. In other words, as members read what others
have published on Protagonize, they have the option to rate they work (members are
strongly encouraged to do so on the “About” and “Getting Started” pages). When a
member rates a creative work, she receives recommendations based on how she rates the
work. So, for example, if a member rates a fiction story about lost loves highly, she will
get a recommendation for another, similar type of story.

Also under the “Explore” tab, the user will find options for “Authors” on the site.
The “Getting Started” description of this page says that it is “a tribute to our popular and
highly-rated authors,” and similar to the choices found under “Read,” this section stresses
the importance of participation and activity among members of the site. Categories such
as “Most Recommended,” “Most Influential,” “Top Rated,” and “Most Active
Commenters” give some indication of how vital making connections on the site can be
for members, especially because each of these categories can be broken down in “Of the
Week” and “Of All Time.” These categories, rather than suggesting a set hierarchy, actually reflect the fluid nature of the site’s use of member-generated ratings and recommendations. Like the creative works, individual authors can be rated and recommended by established members to newer members based on what they have already read and rated favorably. This kind of recommendation can be automated, again based off of how the individual member rates creative works or the specific authors, or it could come in the form of word of mouth from other members as they discuss the writing being done on the site with each other. These features of Protagonize emphasize the notion that members get the most out of the site by reading widely and rating both the works and the authors who have authored them as well as making contact with other members. This ratings system is one of the many ways that users can begin to make connections with others, which is the first step in forming relationships and composing writing with members on the site.

A recent change to the site that demonstrates the moderators’ commitment to fairness to all users regardless of how long they have been part of the community is the category “Most Influential.” As explained on the “FAQ” page, this category replaces “Top Posters.” The moderators explain that some members were taking advantage of this category and submitting short, insubstantial pieces of writing throughout the day to boost their overall post total. This action exploited the real intention of the category, which was to call attention to those who were posting substantial creative works very frequently (daily rather than weekly). The moderators took steps to curb this “negative behavior” and replaced it with “the new influential authors listing, which more accurately reflects (not perfectly, of course, but it’s a lot better) which authors are participating in the site in
beneficial ways.” The moderators want to emphasize that certain types of behaviors are beneficial to the community, such as commenting on members’ creative works or participating in group discussion board posts, and other behaviors are not and will not be tolerated. This “Most Influential” category seems to better represent the aim of the site, the importance placed on member contribution, especially those that might impact other members in a positive way on the site. This “measure of an author’s reach in the system” signifies how consistent contributions, through creative pieces, may lead to more collaboration between members, either directly or indirectly. The more members write, the more there will be for others to read and respond to, both of which are the basis of relationship building on the site.

The third option under “Explore” is “Groups,” which gives users the options of browsing the group directory, creating their own group, or visiting the pages for several of the official Protagonize groups. Official groups, such as “New Members,” “Protagonize Pub,” and “Collaborative Corner,” are moderated by Protagonize staff. Currently there are a total of eight official groups. Including these official groups, there are 291 groups on the site, with the “New Members” group having the most membership at over 16,000. Each group has its own page, which allows for members to start new threads to the group’s discussion board. Only registered members may join or create a group, a restriction to both highlight the benefits of and encourage new membership. The Protagonize groups are meant to be places for members with similar interests and/or goals to meet and build relationships; as the “FAQ” page describes them, they are places that “allow Protagonize authors to mingle with like-minded folks [and] participate in discussions.” If a user is not a member, they are missing out on this crucial feature of the
site. Groups are meant to compliment the creative work done, as they offer a space for members to discuss a variety of topics and even exchange individually-written work with other members for critique.

The final tab on the “Homepage” menu is “Activity.” Recent activity is the focus here, as the options take users to the following selections: “All recent activity,” “Weekly features,” “Recently recommended,” “Recent posts,” and “Recent comments.” These different types of activity cover the previous week and give the user a brief idea of the kinds of contributions that members regularly make to the site. All these options also show the user some of the more active members. Additionally, the “Activity” tab takes the user to the “Who’s online?” page, which shows who is logged on the site at that time (this link can also be found under the “Authors” section under the “Explore” tab). As a social network site, Protagonize wants its members to interact with one another in a variety of ways. Like Facebook, members of Protagonize can chat with other members synchronously when they are logged onto the site. This option for conversation to take place in real-time, rather than the asynchronous conversations on the group discussion boards, works to further build community on the site. For example, synchronous conversation allows members to have live discussion while collaborating on a story, or for members to critique each other’s work in real time. The chat also provides one more simple function: for members to just talk with one another, casually, to build friendships. It also reinforces the idea that members on Protagonize are never alone, that others are always online with them, again fulfilling Johnson’s understanding of the pleasure in the act of writing, connecting with a real audience.

Member Profiles
Most likely, before members would chat with one another on the site, they would get to know others through the information present on each member’s profile page. Much like other SNSs, every member of Protagonize gets to customize his or her own profile page. Also similar to some SNSs, like Twitter, members can choose to create a pseudonym rather than use their actual name. These usernames, along with the avatar image each member selects to visually represent himself on the site, help to create a specific type of personae within the community. When visiting a member’s profile page, this is what a user sees: The top left contains the member’s avatar, and aligned next to this image and centered on the page is the member’s username. Underneath the username is a one-line description that the member creates and can include information about gender, age, and current location. What is interesting about these options, and what sets Protagonize apart from other more popular SNSs, is that the members can choose from a variety of ‘gender’ options ranging from more traditional (‘girl,’ ‘woman,’ ‘lady’) to more unusual (‘chiquita,’ ‘dudette,’ ‘cat’). Location descriptions can be equally traditional or exotic (‘Where There Be Dragons, United Kingdom,’ for example). By being given more creative options, members can create highly unique, memorable profiles that tell other members something about their personalities and who they are within the Protagonize community.

Also included under the username is the member’s ranking, which is based on how much each members posts, links to other personal websites or blogs, as well as options to “Become a Fan” of the author and link to their profile. Under the avatar is a box that provides the statistical information for the member, including the last time he was on the site, when he became a member, how many pages he has published, how many fans he
has, how many recommendations he has been given, and the average rating his pages have received from other members. Further down on the left side of the page is a box listing all the groups that the member belongs to, and below this is the most recent activity which lists the last five times that either the member himself has contributed something to the site (such as a comment on a story or becoming a fan of another member) or other members have interacted with him. Finally, under the “Bio” information, is the comment section, where other members can leave asynchronous messages for him. All this information gives a snapshot as to how active the user is and how many and what types of connections he has with other members.

The last major feature of the profile page is a menu bar, placed beneath the username and brief description. This menu bar includes a “Bio,” “Activity,” “Works,” Reading List,” “Contacts,” and “Statistics.” The “Bio” appears automatically when a member visits another’s profile, and there is no set content to include in this section. Each member can write as little or much as he or she wants. Some typical content includes information about what he likes to read and write off the site, what he has published on Protagonize, and other authors on the site he likes reading. The “Activity” tab provides a more extensive overview than the five most recent types of activity found further down the main profile page. “Works” provides information for all work, collaboratively- and individually-written, on the site, with the author’s top five most highly-rated pages listed at the top. The “Reading List” provides links to other member’s work he’s read and “Contacts” lists all of a member’s friends, fans, and people he follows on the site. Finally, the “Statistics” tab provides a chart of the member’s rating breakdown for the past week and over his entire membership.
The information present on each user profile can become overwhelming, but because the goal of the site is to promote as much interaction as possible between users, this is a space where other members can easily see how much one particular user participates within the community. When one member views a profile page and learns how active another member is, and sees, for example, that this member has over one thousand comments on their profile with many different users, she, too, may be inspired to put more effort into the types of contributions she makes on the site. This friendly, self-motivated competitive spirit drives much interaction on the site.

**Protagonize Members**

With nearly 24,000 members (as of September 2013), Protagonize is a large community of writers. But who are these members? And how is the member activity on the site monitored so as to not be “chaotic” and “uncontrolled,” what Bouton describes as the limitations of previous Addventure-style fiction sites? While the “About” page describes the member-base consisting of a range of writers, from amateur to professional, little else appears on these pages helpful for new users to the site to understand who they may be potentially writing with. What can be gleaned about the more general user base comes from the member profiles, and what the members themselves provide. This information varies widely, from casual users to writing enthusiasts.

What the “FAQ” page does provide are more concrete descriptions of the moderators, the roles they play throughout the operation of the site and in the community, and who they are. As of September 2013, there are eight moderators, including the site founder, Nick Bouton. The moderators are darkliquid, Eloosive, Elorithryn, JackRubashevskiy, Rac7hel, Tasha_Noble, and WeirdMagic, and all moderators have a
green “Mod” flag on their profiles to designate that they are moderators. The description of the moderators says that they are all “dedicated, diligent, and generally wonderful” members of the community who, as a team, discuss all user-submitted infractions and reports. Moderators also have the “authority and ability” to handle the day-to-day issues that members of the site may experience. For example, if a member wishes to change her username, she puts in a Help request with the information and a moderator makes the change for her. Moderators also have the authority to contact members directly about cases they are working on to resolve. The moderators, then, are the “law enforcement” of Protagonize. They are also active members of the community, posting their own stories and contributing to collaboratively-written pieces as well. They represent the site in an official capacity, and therefore set the standard for correct behavior between members. They determine rules based on what they see happening between members of the site, should that activity lead to behavior that is not in the spirit of the community as a whole, and the moderators also enforce existing rules. These moderators help to make the website and its community run effectively, to better meet the needs of members and the goals of the site. By learning and adhering to the rules, which the “Getting Started” page broadly defines as “best practices” for participating in a social network site, members get the best possible experience out of the site, which in turn will make their experiences with others more enjoyable.

One of the key “best practices” the site suggests users participate under is being actively interested in what others are doing on the site. The site moderators recommend showing interest in the Protagonize community by “read[ing] some of the works of your fellow authors, provid[ing] praise or constructive criticism, discuss[ing] writing styles, or
just say[ing] hello on the profiles of authors whose writing you enjoy” (“Getting Started”). One of the discussion board threads from the Collaborative Corner group, “Help me build an idea?” (Appendix 1) also shows members actively contributing to the work of another member on the site. Ryan, the original poster of the thread, begins by explaining his idea, how he came to it, and what he has planned it so far:

I’ve been working a bit on a dream I had, and I’m trying to turn it into a story. I’ve got a basic plot worked out, as well as a fair idea of some of the characters, but I’m having trouble getting everything down pat and connecting B to C and even coming up with A. (As, with many dreams, I was just suddenly in the fray.)

He then provides a synopsis of the characters and general action of the story he has in mind. Several members posted responses, all of which expressed their enthusiasm for Ryan’s idea. Brittany replies, “Sounds super cool!! Is it a collab? ‘Cause if it is, I would totally love to contribute,” and another member, Andy, says, “Time-travelling [sic] emails. Haven’t heard that one before. Sounds promising! I might collaborative on it if given the opportunity.” Both Brittany and Andy are positive about Ryan’s idea, exclaiming that it “sounds super cool!!” and “sounds promising.” They also express their desire to be included in collaboratively-authoring the story. These first three posts from the thread are very consistent with the types of responses members receive when they post their ideas on the Collaborative Corner board. These threads also demonstrate the “best practices” that the moderators suggest members adhere to when joining the site. Andy, Brittany, and Ryan participate on the boards, a central way of becoming an active member on the site, and Brittany and Andy, by giving encouraging responses to Ryan’s idea, show him that his idea is good and could potentially be developed into a larger collaborative story. The playful tone all the members strike in their communications with each other suggest that the board is not only a friendly place, but one with space to
experiment with ideas. The informality of tone, which I consider playful, creates the kind of supportive community beneficial to all writers. Members, through their use of a playful, informal tone, signal to others that this is a space to try out new ideas without harsh judgment. Having the freedom to simply try out ideas without censoring oneself is perhaps one of the most important characteristics of good writing practices. Without such freedom, little writing would probably ever get completed.

**Communication and Connection on Protagonize**

When members understand the more general rules of conduct for being a Protagonize member, they may want to begin establishing communication and connections with others. There are multiple ways across the site for this to happen, such as comments made on other members’ profiles or on their published creative work, publishing one’s own creative work or contributing to another member’s collaborative project, or adding threads to group discussion board. As the tips on the “Getting Started” page explain, it is important for new members to learn how these different means of participation work in order for these members to attract similar attention to their own writing they publish on the site: “there’s no better way to generate interest in your own work than to provide feedback or contribute to the works of others. Our community is very vocal and loves a good debate. Feel free to read some of the works of your fellow authors, provide praise or constructive criticism, discuss writing styles, or just say hello on the profiles of authors whose writing you enjoy.” In other words, the best way to get others to read and comment on work is to read and comment on their work. The more a member participates, the more interaction she will get out of the community. In addition to receiving feedback on writing, this participation can also lead to members building
relationships with one another. As the “Getting Started” phrases it, “We guarantee that you’ll almost immediately reap rewards from your participation in the form of feedback on or contributions to your own writing. And heck, it’s fun, and you’ll make new friends, so why not?”

As discussed in the overview of Protagonize’s goals, the site was redesigned shortly after its launch from a solely adventure-style, or branched style, of fiction writing to include more writing options, including linear (referred to as “standard” on the site) collaborative and individual (referred to as “solo” on the site) work. The member-generated creative writing makes up much of the work published on the site, and is one of two places (the other being group discussion boards) where community-wide interaction takes place. According to the “Getting Started” page, under the section ‘The Anatomy of a Work,’ all creative writing on the site is divided into sections called “work pages.” Collaborative standard and adventure stories both consist of these “work pages,” but there is one key difference. In standard work, the original author decides whether or not the other contributors can choose their own titles, or if each author chooses the title for the next page in the work. In adventure-style works, the first page acts as the root, off of which all the following pages become “branches.” Each branch can have one to three subpages of its own, and unlike standard stories where contributing authors have the possibility of choosing their page’s title, “the titles of these [sub] branches are decided on by the author of the page” the member is reading. The significance of who titles subsequent pages or branches of a story is that these titles are meant to guide the writer in the way she composes the page, including tone, characters, plot, setting, or actions. It is
one way for writers to cue others how they want the story to continue, or provide a kind of skeleton outline for how they see the work progressing.

Contributing to a collaborative piece of writing is not the only way that members can engage with one another on the site. All aspects of the creative work, from the root page through each sub-branch or chapter, as well as all member profile pages, also have a comments section. For stories, members can choose to post for an individual page or for the story as a whole, a distinction that may be useful if the comment is specific to just one page of a very long work. Comments also offer a feature to see the entire discussion between two members called View Conversation, which allows members to review the progression of a conversation, useful if they don’t want to repeat issues that have already been covered. Members have the option of labeling their comments, including “Note” when making an editorial suggestion, “Praise” when offering positive feedback, and “Advice” when providing constructive criticism. Comments are a vital means of communication between members of the site, and these options, along with their asynchronous nature, allow for other members to use submitted comments as models for what content their own will contain.

All stories submitted to Protagonize can also be rated on a five-star scale, with a rating of one star for “strongly dislike” and five stars for “love.” These ratings provide the basis for calculating member standings, such as Top Rated Author. Members can scroll over to select a rating for the work they have read, and all ratings for all published creative work are member-generated. The “Getting Started” page provides more information about the benefits and possible consequences of ratings:

Please try to rate fairly, as your ratings will be used to create reading recommendations for you later on, down the road. The more accurate you are in
your ratings, the better our recommendations will be, so it’s in your best interest to rate fairly! Also, please try not to rate anyone badly maliciously [sic], as if it happens on a regular basis, we can easily track down the responsible parties as each rating is tagged with your user information in our database.

The advice given for new members, then, is to rate others’ work, especially if you enjoyed them, because this type of participation is useful not only for the automated recommendations they will receive but to better network with other members. The more a member actively tries to connect with others on the site, the more others may reciprocate. This reciprocation could include reading and commenting on that member’s writing, but perhaps other members would ask her to join in collaborations with them in the future.

There are consequences, though, for being deliberately mean-spirited in one’s ratings, as the explanation stresses. The phrase “rate fairly” appears twice in the description on ratings, as well as a warning for members who may appear to be knowingly rating works lower than other members. Participation, though greatly encouraged, should be done according to those “best practices” of social network sites. And while these best practices certainly differ from site to site, the moderators of Protagonize want to emphasize that certain behaviors and activities between users will or will not be tolerated. This is one way that new members learn how to be members of the community, by learning the preferred code of conduct by the expert users and then incorporating these behaviors into their own use and interaction.

As an online community developed with certain features of SNSs, Protagonize enhances and encourages its members to make connections with one another. Building and maintaining relationships is an integral part of the site’s goals, and these relationships shape the way that writing is done on the site. This writing, in turn, influences the relationships and the atmosphere of the entire Protagonize community. Member profiles
function to keep members invested in the site, as they create a persona that other members will begin to associate with that username and avatar. Friendships form around the ways in which users present themselves on the site, and specifically through different forms of communication between members. All member interaction takes on significance and meaning as connections with others form. A larger intention of Protagonize, then, is to build connections between its members that will last. This is in the best interest of the community but it also helps these writers continue to write, as these connections become the foundation for pleasurable writing.
Chapter 2: Getting the Hang of Things: How SNSs Create Connections through Writing

“I’m thinking about starting a new collab about a magical realm that can only be reached by selling your soul to the devil. The realm would be better than the regular world, and the people that live there are better off.

If anyone finds this interesting and thinks they would be interested and helping with this, comment below.

P.S.

I’m also looking for other stories to contribute to. If anyone knows of a good one, suggestions are always welcome!”— Greg, Protagonize member

The epigraph comes from the first post in a Collaborative Corner discussion board thread titled, “Looking for People to Collab With” (Appendix 2). Greg, the original poster for this thread, demonstrates through his use of site-specific idioms (“collab”), the manner in which he pitches his idea for a collaboratively-written story, and the way he encourages others to “comment below” in the thread if they are interested to participate with him, that he is an experienced member of Protagonize. He understands the common terminology used by other members of the site and the proper way to establish a thread on Collaborative Corner that will be more likely to garner not only responses from other users, but productive responses that will lead to other members writing with him. Finally, he realizes that in order to be a good member of the Protagonize community, he must be actively engaged in the writing that other members start, hence the postscript that asks for members to suggest additional collaborations that he could join. In a just four sentences,
Greg shows that he is aware of the nature of the site: it is a space where being a writer\(^8\) becomes defined through the participation of the members of the Protagonize community. While single-author stories are certainly a possibility within this community, even those frequently have some level of participation by other members in a variety of ways, including in the comment sections of the published work, in comments on other group discussion boards, and/or in private messages sent between members.

Community, then, is key for the success of Protagonize. I define “community” as the sense of belonging to a group of individuals who all have similar interests and being supported, encouraged, and helped by those individuals. Community is built upon the connections of its members; therefore, I understand community and connection to work interdependent. Connection is a foundation of community formation. Without members of a community feeling a sense of connection with each other, the community could not cohere and last. The stronger a community becomes, the greater sense of connection that forms. Here, it is important for members to establish, build, and maintain relationships with other users. This relationship building happens on the site much as it does in the real world: through introductions, conversations around various topics, through informal, playful attitudes. The social network site (SNS) platform features that Protagonize

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\(^8\) I use the term ‘writer’ here instead of ‘authorship’ because I do believe that within the contexts of Protagonize, knowing who the writer is becomes an essential component to reading and responding to the work. Unlike Roland Barthes’ assertion in “The Death of the Author” that a reader does not (and should not) need to know the feelings of the writer in order to understand a text, within the space of the SNS Protagonize, knowing and perhaps even befriending the writer of one’s favorite works is part of the experience of participating within the site. Much as Michel Foucault suggests in “What is an Author?,” being a writer on Protagonize creates a series of associations, some of these listed directly within the site (such as all the work each member has published on the site), some of these developed within each member’s own experiences as he or she actively participates with others.
incorporates, such as user profiles (which allow members to choose an image or avatar to represent them throughout the site as well as give more information about themselves to others and what they like to write), group discussion boards (where members can have non-synchronous conversations with others on various topics), and the comment sections of the creative work, all permit members a variety of ways to make contact with others on the site. But how do these SNS features facilitate relationship building and community establishment? And what do these features add to our understanding about the nature of relationships between writers? These are important questions to answer, I believe, because they get at central writing habits that are helpful for writers to have. These writing habits include working with a group or audience who comes to understand your writing, who encourages you and offers advice and guidance, so you come to understand writing as an inherently social act, and receive pleasure from your writing and the connections it allows you to make with others.

To begin to answer these questions about how relationships are developed on Protagonize, this section will present an analysis of select threads from the Collaborative Corner discussion board. Through this analysis, I will show that on Protagonize, authorship becomes defined as and through the communities of members who write together. This community authorship is not limited to the final published product, but begins in the pre-writing stages that Collaborative Corner evidences. These pre-writing stages are additionally important because it is here that many writing relationships form, relationships that lead to collaborative writing. As members begin to brainstorm together, to play out ideas for each other’s stories, and develop friendships on the site through these kinds of communicative acts, they establish different conventions for both the
stories they write as well as the manner in which they communicate with each other; these are some of the key characteristics of what I mean by “community authorship.” As these conventions emerge, members experience pleasure in the multiple kinds of writing they do with one another, as they build connections across the site.

The ways in which members communicate with each other becomes central to this analysis, and Bakhtin’s theory of “speech genres” and “utterances” allows us to see how this community authorship grows out of these communicative acts. Though the understanding of writing as an inherently collaborative process is generally accepted today by writing theorists, and though more frequently writing instructors will incorporate digital technologies into their classrooms to enhance collaborative activities, according to Charlotte Thralls, there is still “no clearly formulated theory to explain the range and significance of relationships that can exist among collaborators,” (64) and no theory that also explains how digital technology enhances the relationships that can develop among writers through various stages of the writing process and through different types of collaboration. I believe that Bakhtin’s understanding of “spheres of communication,” and the unique types of utterances that develop within them, provides an apt description for understanding communications that happen through SNSs. While Thralls focuses on the various relationships that develop between article author and journal readers and editors through their written communication chains, her own framing of Bakhtin’s theories can offer much towards understanding the way communication and relationship building — as well as larger community building — happens on SNSs, and specifically Protagonize.
Put simply, Bakhtin’s theory posits “spheres of communication” that form amongst individuals belonging to the same community. These spheres have similar words and phrases that take on significance within the community, and their use by community members strengthens the sense of belonging all members feel to the community. Social network sites bring focus to the notion of community and collection that Bakhtin’s theory implies. Members of different types of SNSs often create online relationships with those they know in real life, or they form or join groups with other members whom they do not know offline. In either situation, these different kinds of communities form specific language usages, which get repeated and therefore strengthened through their continual use. In fact, the visual component of SNSs allows for members to actually see the language use and can trace, visually, the kinds of connections members make with each other through this language use. With Collaborative Corner, though the aim of the discussion board threads typically includes concerns such as brainstorming ideas for collaborative writing projects, the simultaneous — and equally important – practices of relationship-building demonstrate that on Protagonize, the process of writing overlaps with the establishment of writing communities and member connection. And it is here that authorship develops as a community-based effort.

**Everyone Join In: SNSs’s Enhancement of Communication’s Sociality**

Much scholarship discusses the act of collaboration and collaborative writing, both inside and outside the academy, as a beneficial system for writers and writing (Bruffee; Lunsford and Ede; Day and Eodice; Gere; Spigelman). The focus of this section is not to praise or challenge the potential benefits of collaboration for writers. What is of interest here, instead, are the ways in which specific SNS features, such as discussion boards,
allow for certain types of communication that enhance the opportunities for writers to
create and strengthen collaborative writing relationships. Past studies of collaborative
writing practices show that in order for such writing partnerships to work, each writer
must, to some extent, know and trust the other writer/s (Gere; Ede and Lunsford; Day and
Eodice). Even if the writers do not consider themselves ‘friends,’ there should exist in
their relationship something that lets them feel comfortable sharing ideas and writing
with the other person/s. Whether they realize it or not, what collaborative writers
cultivate in their relationships with one another is a sense that no matter what they’re
working on, the work itself, along with all its inherent processes, has value. In fact,
writers who collaborate often validate each other’s contribution to the work.

With the rise of computer-mediated communication (CMC), opportunities to
establish these comfortable relationships do not have to be constrained by geography.
Now through CMC, writers can maintain connections and their relationships with their
fellow writers more easily and participate in more and different kinds of collaborative
writing. Again, while this type of relationship building through CMC is discussed in a
more general way (Day and Eodice; Rouzie; Selfe), little research at this time focuses on
the way in which a specific kind of CMC, social network sites (SNSs), can facilitate both
collaborative writing and the relationship and community building between writers that
are essential for it. The writing done on SNSs challenges traditional and popular theories
and conceptions about writing practices that assert writing as a form of individual
expression. The assumed solitary genius (the writer) gives voice through language to her
inner being, experiences, and thoughts. From the perspective of this view, collaborative
writing appears distinct, a kind of deviation from the norm framed as a solitary writer
practicing alone to give shape to thoughts and experiences that are her sole belonging; however, some theorists of communication, in particular M.M. Bakhtin, radically refute this traditional understanding. In fact, Bakhtin’s understanding of language use, communication, and writing point toward these acts as fundamentally collaborative and always-already social practices that can never be engaged in alone. All utterances are structured by their essentially social nature.

Although Bakhtin’s theory of communication throws into relief the social and collaborative dimensions of communication in a general way, challenging us to think of traditional writing practices as collaborative, his theory loses its usefulness in this context when it does not allow us to see finer nuances of what I term “collaborative intensity.” Although all writing, all language use is indeed collaborative, some writing practices necessitate their users become aware of the inherently collaborative and social nature of the writing act. In other words, it is not only useful but also necessary for writers to develop an understanding of the level of “collaborative intensity” a specific writing project calls for. A novelist writing may be just fine in believing his project to be just an expression of his inner self. Government writers working together to author statistical consensus reports cannot. Because some writing tasks and environments require writers’ heightened awareness to collaboration, theorizing more directly the unique dynamics of the explicit relationships between writers becomes necessary. With SNSs in particular, users develop a hyper-awareness of the social and collaborative nature of writing.

Bakhtin’s theory of communication, specifically his understanding of speech genres and utterances, provides a useful framework for understanding how writers’ communication through SNSs and their hyper-awareness of the collaborative nature of
the technology works to enhance both the writing done on the sites and the ways in which
that writing leads to connections between users and to larger community formation. An
analysis of how the non-academic writers of Protagonize use specific features common to
social network sites will show that SNSs provide useful and hitherto overlooked
possibilities for all people — academic or otherwise — who wish to collaborate on
writing. Before analyzing actual discussion board threads from Protagonize’s
Collaborative Corner group, I will review Bakhtin’s notions of speech genres and
utterances and discuss how his ideas inform our understanding of communication through
SNSs in light of other key texts on collaborative writing relationships.

Bakhtin’s understanding of how communication works — links of utterances that
form the basis of speech genres within specific spheres of communication — emphasizes
the importance of how we establish communities and relationships through
communication. Even the most mundane, everyday speech, such as greetings, has
significance as they influence more formal and specialized speech genres. For Bakhtin
communication is inherently collaborative, an active process for both the speaker/writer
and the audience, a sequence of exchanges that depends on and builds off of one another.
These communication chains start with utterances, each of which are unique and “can
reflect the individuality of the speaker (or writer)” (63). Utterances include features of
compositional structure, thematic content, and style, and over time and through use by
many different speakers in specific spheres of communication, these utterances develop
more consistent forms, which Bakhtin calls speech genres (61). Because these speech
genres become such an ingrained part of our life’s communication, he argues that “We
use them confidently and skillfully in practice, and it is quite possible for us not even to
suspect their existence *in theory*” (78, emphasis original). This is particularly true of what he calls “primary” speech genres — greetings, small talk, other casual pleasantries of daily communication — that tend to get overlooked in favor of “secondary” speech genres, such as literature and other highly-specialized forms of communication. However, all communication, even the most forgettable, the most often repeated to the point of seeming to lose its value, in fact has a purpose and is part of a much larger communication chain that ultimately brings together all humans through our needs and desires to speak or write to each other.

Emphasizing and appreciating the value of primary speech genres becomes important when studying much of the communication that takes place on SNSs, as the sites generally have the reputation as being useless forms of connection. However, the platform’s features such as commenting and status updating, both of which may be primary-speech genre heavy in nature, gives users an easy means of, in Bakhtin’s words, “assimilating” each other’s utterances. In his understanding, communication happens in this way:

> the unique speech experience of each individual is shaped and developed by continuous and constant interaction with others' individual utterances. This experience can be characterized to some degree as the process of assimilation -- more or less creative -- of others' words (and not the words of a language). Our speech, that is, all our utterances (including creative works), is filled with others' words, varying degrees of otherness or varying degrees of “our-own-ness,” varying degrees of awareness and detachment. These words of others carry with them their own expression, their own evaluative tone, which we assimilate, rework, and re-accentuate. (89, emphasis original)

As users of SNSs connect with others through the technology of the sites, they are helping to make obvious those primary speech genres, such as greetings, small talk, and other casual modes of conversation, that, through their constant use, have become
unrecognizable as such. SNS users do this by constantly using these primary speech
genres in many of their different kinds of communication within the sites they regularly
use. The process of assimilation becomes clear as the chains of communication within
specific speech communities can be traced and followed through the visual representation
of the (inter)connected comments. While each user does indeed have an individual sense
of expression, these utterances show the dependencies on all the other utterances that
have come before them, both the “varying degrees of otherness” as well as the “varying
degrees of ‘our-own-ness.”’ The SNS platform also makes clear the boundaries
surrounding these utterances (boundaries being another characteristic of Bakhtin
identifies), as each comment, each contribution to a discussion board, is associated with
an individual user. The technology of the SNS, in other words, makes clear the otherwise
taken for granted features of our everyday communication. SNS technology shows how
significant the often overlooked primary speech genres are to the establishment and
maintenance of communities, and this technology visually represented the boundaries
around each utterance a user makes. In these ways, SNSs provide an enactment of
Bakhtin’s understandings of communication, a theory that seeks to emphasize the
importance of all speech. With this understanding, the constant stream of interconnected
communication becomes valid, valued as it can be seen as the building blocks of all other
speech genres.

On SNSs, users connect with a variety of other individuals, with whom they have a
range of relationships, from acquaintances to friends to family members and intimates,
and with whom they form various communities, or “spheres of communication,” each
with their own unique utterances (specific words and phrases) that constantly get reused
and revised by the communities’ members. Some of the reasons for these types of communication that take place often involve simply maintaining or reaffirming friendships. When looking at the communication that happens on sites such as Protagonize, however, these communities often develop with the goal of creating and maintaining writing relationships between their users. For these users, they are not simply changing or perhaps even challenging the processes in which they may ordinarily write, but they are also learning to balance these writing processes while working with other people, many of whom may have drastically different processes of their own. This creates different parameters that must be navigated in order for the collaborative writing to be successful (the definition of “success” having a broad meaning in this context, and including any aspect of the writing process, from collaboratively brainstorming an idea up to the completion of a multi-branched writing project on Protagonize). Some of these parameters may include issues such as trust and consensus. Day and Eodice, in their analysis of academic collaborative writing partners (First Person), found that all the writing partners who participated in their study experienced pleasure in working with each other and would continue to seek out writing projects to author collaboratively in the future. Day and Eodice describe these writing partners’ relationships as “respectful, trusting” (38) and state that “the ineffable and affective dimensions of the relationship, though difficult to articulate, are central to the success of all the co-authors” they studied (39). As co-authors themselves, Day and Eodice suggest one of the elements that need to be present in order for successful collaboration to occur is a supportive relationship that works for all the writers involved in the project.
A key element for such supportive relationships is consensus. Day and Eodice explain that for some, consensus is an “ethical problem because it has the capacity to minimize potentially productive conflict and silence marginalized voices” (35). However, they argue that this widespread negative framing of consensus is an outgrowth of traditional notions of individual authorship and writing production, a tradition which understands writers as needing full reign to produce material that expresses their singular individuality and meaning; thus, consensus takes on the valence of a symptom of constraint on personal creativity. While the exact dynamics of the writing relationships will, of course, be different for every writing group, consensus should not signify that one writer gives up her ideas in order to placate those with whom she’s writing. Rather than stifling ideas or voices, consensus becomes a cornerstone of successful collaborative writing because “in successful co-authoring [it] is necessary and inevitable” and shows that the writers have gone through “the give and take, the stimulating struggle of the work process” of which consensus is the result (37). According to Day and Eodice, when achieved in the collaborative writing partnerships they studied, consensus strengthens the underlying relationships the writers had already cultivated.

The negotiations that happen when multiple writers work together, the back-and-forth of discussion and perhaps even the arguments that occur before consensus can be reached, is an aspect of collaborative writing that composition theorists have suggested writers thrive on and even need in order to work better. As Bakhtin understands communication, from the moment a speaker (writer) begins to speak (write), she “expects a response” from her audience, “an active responsive understanding,” as if “the entire utterance is constructed […] in anticipation of encountering this response” (94). This
response lets the writer know that her ideas have value. One way of understanding this need for interactivity may be glimpsed by considering what Day and Eodice call the “constellated author,” the writer “who can choose to act (possess agency) but does not act alone” (18). This “constellated author,” an author-figure that is multi-voiced, is the opposite of the “autonomous author,” the more traditionally understood author figure who thinks, works, and writes alone. What the “constellated author” seeks is a community of other writers where various forms of collaboration can take place. Since each writer always has a collection of experiences from their lives that shape the basis of their knowledge, within a community, each “author’s individual reflections meet the reflections of others […] as the members of that community make meaning together” (20). The concept of the “constellated author” echoes Kenneth Bruffee’s ideas about collaborative learning being most effective when everyone in the community (or classroom) brings their experiences to bear on the understanding and knowledge creation done within the community (“Collaborative Learning”). We naturally seek out what others think, say, and do. We want to know what they think of our ideas, and we want to be asked for our opinion on others’ ideas. SNSs become an important communication tool for writers because they make it possible to be a part of a community in which this type of activity — writers interacting with one another to seek ideas and feedback, and who offer their ideas and feedback to other writers as well — happens regularly and is expected to happen as part of the design and purpose of the site. SNSs create spaces where knowledge making happens through the collaboration of multiple individuals, each bringing their unique lived experiences into conversations with others’ equally unique experiences.
Connection and the experience of feedback are also important aspects of effective writing, and necessary for writers if they are to also view writing as something they enjoy and receive pleasure from, precursors, I believe, for writers to continue writing. As discussed previously, T.R. Johnson’s understanding of pleasure in writing is the connection between an author and her reader. Johnson’s simple formulation of how writers experience pleasure makes sense when also understood through a lens of feedback, an action that requires connection between two or more people. Feedback is important, according to psychologist Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi in his book *Flow: The Psychology of Optimal Experience*, because it allows a person to enter into what he identifies as a “flow” state. A person experiences “flow” when she becomes so immersed in an activity as to forget about her body. She does not worry about the past or future, but is instead immersed in the present. “Flow” also comes from the feedback a person receives from others so that she can continue to improve her skills and not be stuck where an activity no longer challenges her. Csikszentmihalyi describes the state of flow as being “important both because it makes the present instant more enjoyable, and because it builds the self-confidence that allows us to develop skills and make significant contributions to humankind” (42). Developing self-confidence as a writer is important, especially in a community like Protagonize, which centers itself around acts of writing, because when a member believes in his ability to write, he can also help others, build their own confidence. Being a self-assured writer means being able to contribute to the larger community of writers by giving feedback that helps others improve their skills. Giving feedback, in turn, helps to reinforce connections vital to the functioning of the community.
“Don’t be shy!”: New Member Initiation and Overview of Collaborative Corner

On Protagonize, while many of the features, like profiles and comment sections, would be familiar to members who already use other SNSs such as Facebook, the focus on various types of creative collaborative writing makes the site unique. When users decide to create membership accounts and then begin participating on the site, they may feel at a loss about what to do and where to begin. Even though the “About” and “Help” pages offer advice for new members, much of the learning takes place through different types of activities done on the site, including commenting on other members’ creative writing and adding to threads on group discussion boards. All of these kinds of participation allows members to not only begin interacting and meeting others, but gives them an introduction to the conventions for language use and ways of communicating as it is done on the site.

When a person creates a Protagonize account, they are automatically placed in the New Members group (they later have the option to leave this group). The aims of the New Members group include “learn[ing] the ropes” and “meet[ing] other authors.” Created by the site’s founder Nick Bouton in June 2009, the group (as of October 2013) has 16,635 members with 766 different discussion board threads and over 3,300 total comments. New members are encouraged to ask the moderators or other members any questions they have about the site as “there are no stupid questions here.” From the

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When an individual signs up for a Protagonize account, they are automatically made members of the New Members group. The membership numbers, therefore, are great, while the activity in the group remains small (about 20%). One interpretation of this is that new members may not need to use this group, preferring instead to begin activity on the site through a process of trial and error, learning from other, more experienced members as they do. The smaller activity in the group could also be from new members simply ‘lurking’ on the boards, reading through the threads to have their questions answered, then becoming active on the site without formally leaving the group.
information in the group overview, members get the impression that the site’s community is welcoming and wants new members to feel a part of the community as soon as possible. Bouton himself emphasizes this impression in his announcement “Welcome to Protagonize! New Here? Read this First,” which always appears toward the top of the discussion board. In it, Bouton describes the environment of the site as “very welcoming,” and he hopes that new members will “feel comfortable participating in the community right away.” He offers several tips and advice for this to happen, one being for members to fill out their profile: “you’d be surprised how much more likely you are to get feedback and be able to join in the community if you spend even a few minutes telling us a little about yourself. And don’t forget the profile picture! It always helps to break the ice. :)” As a prominent feature of SNSs, the member profile acts as an introduction for other members, highlighting each user’s activities on the site, their favorite authors, and what they like to write, along with any other information the user wishes to share.

For new members, it is helpful to not only have a presence through their profile pages, but also to read and write widely across the site. Bouton and other experienced members recommend for new members to read others’ work and to offer comments and feedback. There are two benefits to this type of activity: first, according to Bouton, members will enjoy doing this and “it’s a great way to familiarize [themselves] with how the site works,” and second, by commenting on what they read, new members will be more likely to make connections with others. A common question on the New Members threads is “How do I get people to read my story?” and a common answer is to read widely of other members’ creative writing and then leave comments for them. It’s
interesting to note that Bouton associates learning how the site works through active participation with the possible pleasure the user will simultaneously experience. This suggests that a founding principle of the site includes the belief that writing is more enjoyable when done within a supportive and active community, a community that establishes what is acceptable for members to say and do. Part of the accepted behavior in the community includes “paying back the favor” of feedback, so members will often read the work of those who leave them comments and then in turn, leave those members comments as well. This is just one way to make connections with other members.

Another way to do so would be for members to begin writing, “whether it’s a comment or feedback on a story or page you’ve just read, saying hello to a fellow author on their profile, a brand new story you’ve decided to write, or a comment in the group discussions. There are no rules here about seniority, and everyone’s happy to welcome new community members. Don’t be shy!” There are a variety of ways for members to make connections with others through writing, so each person can choose the way they feel most comfortable making that first connection. It is possible that a member could never participate in any creative writing, but to be a member of Protagonize means that the individual most likely is a writer or has an interest in becoming one. The aim of the collaborative environment, with multiple ways to establish relationships with others, is to author a piece of creative writing with one or more members.

The Collaborative Corner group, then, is where members can go once they’ve learned about the more general mechanics of the site and are looking to talk about their ideas for a collaborative project with others. Bouton also formed this group in September 2009 and he continues to moderate the group today. Collaborative Corner is recognized
as an official Protagonize group, which simply means that a Protagonize staff member moderates it. Like all public groups, membership into this group is voluntary (the private groups have membership on an invitation-only basis). The group has 806 members, 1,395 threads posted to the discussion board, and over 21,500 comments (April 2013). After the New Members group, Collaborative Corner has the highest group membership of the official Protagonize groups. Collaborative Corner’s intention, according to its description, is to “dig up a few helping hands” when members want to begin a specific collaborative creative writing project. Collaborative Corner appears to be very active, with activity happening on the board daily. When the group first launched, many members used it primarily to ask others to read and offer critiques of their own writing rather than use it to meet others interested in collaboratively writing together. To allow this group to focus on collaborative writing, Bouton created a different group called “Critiques Wanted,” which allows members to post their writing when they want “serious, detailed critiques” from other members.

Much of the activity that takes place on Collaborative Corner’s discussion board seems to focus on finding others to help with a specific writing project. Members come to the group when they have an idea that they want to work on with at least one other person, and frequently these writing projects seem to be genre-based (such as science-fiction, fantasy, superhero, etc.) and they are primarily short fiction. The member will begin the thread by stating as completely as possible what the idea is and what she wants from other members, including help on developing plot or characters. She also usually asks if there would be anyone else interested in writing with her, a request that frequently contains both utterances of politeness and eagerness. If the member who posts the thread
seems excited about her idea, but also genuinely interested in what other members could contribute to the project, then she is more likely to get productive responses that will lead to successful collaborative writing. Conversely, if a member does not seem as enthusiastic about an idea, then she may not receive any responses from others on her thread. Once the member posts the initial thread, other members will then ask follow-up questions, usually about specifics regarding the type of characters or setting of the story, and then if they are interested, they will ask to join the collaboration.

So while the initial idea for the story comes from the member who begins the thread, the idea gets developed collectively with others who begin to join in the conversation. Usually, before the writing project begins, the original poster (o.p.) will ask to see character sketches that outline what the other members have in mind for the character they want to write into the piece. These sketches usually include a name, age, sex/race, as well as a brief background of the character that offers motivations for the specific behaviors. The o.p. asks for this information in order to be sure that the character (as well as the other writer/s) will be a good fit for the collaboration she has in mind. Contributors to the thread post their character sketches to the thread so that others who may join the conversation later can get a sense about what’s already been discussed and the form the collaboration is starting to take. The o.p. will then create a page for the story in the writing section of the site and post its link to the thread. Sometimes, during the actual writing of the project, the members continue to post thoughts and ideas on the Collaborative Corner thread, though this may not happen in all collaborations. Usually, once the larger ideas have been discussed on the boards, the discussion moves to the comment sections of the creative project’s pages or offline through private messaging
between authors. These initial conversations, though, become important and interesting because it is here that members have one way of beginning writing friendships with others. These friendships, in turn, help to establish and maintain the larger communities within the site, as often the same writers will repeatedly write together. Finally, these pre-writing conversations demonstrate the multiple-voiced, community-based understanding of authorship that makes Protagonize a unique online writing space, one with pleasure, play and connection at its center.

**Data Collection and Analysis**

All data for this chapter was selected from four discussion board threads found on the Collaborative Corner group. The dates for these threads range from October 2009-January 2010. All threads have at least three different members who contributed at least one post, and all threads have at least nine posts. These criteria — dates, number of participates, and number of posts — allowed me to be more selective when choosing threads to analyze (see Table 2). First, many of the threads posted to the boards have only two members communicating, and this communication may either move to another space on the site (such as private messaging or the creative writing section) or just stop. So, by focusing on threads with at least three members participating, and with the conversation happening on those threads lasting at least nine posts, this allows us to see a greater variety of communication exchange happening, and therefore more productive conversation for community and friendship establishment, story development, or both. A minimum of three members participating in the conversation also allowed for a wider variety of voices, which I believe leads to a greater variety of exchanges between the members. Second, I selected threads from over three years ago because I wanted
conversations that had been completed (or at least were not currently still active and ongoing). The time also approximately corresponds to the establishment of the Collaborative Corner group, so I believe that the conversations happening at this time demonstrate the members establishing and learning the appropriate means of communicating with one another on the group’s discussion boards.

What I define as “relationship” in the Collaborative Corner group is what appear to be friendly, supportive conversations between members across the group’s threads. One of the major trends I observed across the group’s discussion board threads for this four-month time period was that every member who chose to participate in a thread, i.e., post a response to someone else in the thread, was very friendly, supportive, and generally wanting to interact with the other members. These qualities I observed in several ways, including posts that were offering encouragement and/or advice about another member’s ideas; posts that involved jokes and other witty comments that were made in a way to suggest a casual, informal attitude that better allowed all members to not feel pressured about their writing; posts that talked specifically about the act of writing and/or another member’s writing ability, their strengths and weaknesses; and finally posts that discussed the brainstorming and writing planning members wanted to do on a story. Much of the discussion in these threads focuses on developing ideas for writing, but they also show a lot of more casual, fun interactions between the site members. These threads demonstrate a larger attitude of play that seemed consistent across Protagonize as a whole. This kind of informality, I believe, is useful for the writers on the site to build connections and then relationships with one another. This kind of informality adds to the overall playful attitude towards writing, where the writing is a product of the relationships formed within
the site. Collaborative Corner, then, is an important group on Protagonize as it allows members to meet to write together but to also get to know one another more, a primary characteristic of the site that leads more to relationships, and perhaps even friendships, forming between the members.

**Table 2: Collaborative Corner Threads**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Name of Collaborative Corner Discussion Board thread</th>
<th>Looking for People to Collab With</th>
<th>Okay, I don’t work well in a team, but hear me out</th>
<th>Quote Yourself! Help me build an idea</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Number of posts in thread</td>
<td>18</td>
<td>149</td>
<td>51</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Number of participants</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Jan. 29 - Jan 31, 2010</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Establishing Collaborative Writing Relationships and Community through SNSs**

Protagonize offers an interesting site in which to see writers both building relationships *and* creatively writing together in the online space, activities dependent on and facilitating of connection. This connection becomes literalized through the SNS features, where responses to other members’ group discussion board threads can be visually traced, forming what Bakhtin identifies as “chains” of communication. These communication chains emphasize the ways in which smaller communities within the larger community of the site form. As a site that provides various means for collaborative writing, in addition to multiple ways for users to create and maintain communities, it is a unique test case to see exactly how the SNS platform may be useful for writers. Protagonize allows users to create and join groups, which can be centered around a variety of topics and activities, including specific genres (such as type of writing, like
science-fiction or fantasy) or the form of writing (like short story or poetry), the writing process (brainstorming, revising) or sharing work and getting feedback from other members. The Collaborative Corner group, as a public group any member can join, allows users to pitch ideas to each other, in the interest of both developing those ideas as well as getting others to join them in the writing of the story. The group’s discussion boards also provide many examples of users not only working out preliminary story ideas, but also establishing, creating, and maintaining relationships with one another. At the same time they are creating these relationships, they are also creating and revising the ways in which communication happens on the site. Members develop idioms, specialized phrasing, and, to use Bakhtin’s terminology, other common primary speech genres (such as “collab” for “collaboration”) that other, newer members of the site learn through their communication with these more experienced members. This kind of learning and then incorporation of these primary speech genres furthers the sense of community among members, and allows for more friendships to develop, which on Protagonize often led to writing as well.

Examples from Collaborative Corner will demonstrate how members create connections with others on the site, using the languages or “utterances,” as Bakhtin calls them, already established elsewhere on Protagonize. Through this process of repetition, these communication forms take on conventional aspects, and the more a member uses and adheres to the conventions, the better she becomes at participating and reinforcing the larger Protagonize community, the smaller, unique communities of users within the site, and the myriad ways these users form connections with one another.
One of the threads that I found to be a rich example of members establishing connections with one another was “Okay, i don’t work well in a team, but hear me out…” (Appendix 3). At 149 replies running over two months’ time, this is one of the longer posts during the time period selected for data collection, and seems to be one of the longer threads within the group to date. But what is also interesting about this thread is that it shows how one newer member, Brittany, learns how to be a member on the site. Her learning takes two forms: first, she learns about how to collaboratively write on Protagonize and second, she learns how to establish and maintain friendships with other members on the site. Both these activities are important for members to learn how to do if they want to more fully experience the site and get the most out of what creator Nick Bouton describes as “friendly, supportive environment” for collaborative creative writing (“FAQ”).

Member Adam started this thread on Oct. 1, 2009. According to his member profile, he first signed up for a Protagonize account August 20, 2009, so at the beginning of October, he’s still a fairly new member. Both the word choice and tone of his post suggest that he’s interested but perhaps also anxious about starting a collaborative story:

Hey fellow humans,
Ever since i joined Protag i’ve looked at Collabs and wondered how people worked together in a team like that, allowing other people to mix their ideas with their own.
I would love to try a collab with somebody, but i would like it to be unconventional mixing the following:
-Sci-fi
-Fantasy
-Comedy
-Parody?
I think it could work out to be a fairly good idea with a little help from others […]
The title of the post, “Okay, i don’t work well in a team, but hear me out” acts as a kind of confessional, or perhaps a warning, about Adam’s (in)ability to collaborate, but his posting within the Collaborative Corner site, as well as the request to “hear [him] out” suggest that he’s interested in trying and learning how to write with others. So, he’s both hesitant to participate, hence the pseudo-warning, but he’s also curious about what it means to “collab” with others, how the members “mix their ideas” with others’ ideas to create a story. Newer members may read other members’ collaboratively-written stories and wonder, like Adam, what it means to collaborate on the site and how to begin a collaboration with others.

In a broader academic context, Adam’s anxiety about collaboratively-produced texts is common. This sort of curiosity mixed with ambivalence about the prospect of writing with another person is understandable considering what co-authors Day and Eodice identify as “mainstream impressions of collaborative work,” which tend to negatively frame this kind of writing practice as unnatural and unproductive (22). Both inside and outside the academy, much collaborative work, especially collaborative writing, is looked upon with skepticism regarding questions of ownership, questions which come about from an adherence to the notion of the original, solitary genius. Being able to clearly identify who wrote what is often an important marker of ownership as well as an acknowledgment for production, for an individual’s work output. The borders between ownership of original, creative work naturally blurs when two or more people come together, and therefore we are unable to compete with each other or to “shine” by being productive—the measure of productivity is not connected to an individual. So,
Adam’s conflicted feelings in how this can be accomplished on this site dedicated to collaborative writing should be expected.

Adam’s post also demonstrates, however, other qualities that many users of Protagonize typically exhibit in their various writings on the site: sociality, honesty, humor, and an interest to experiment with writing that is somewhat “unconventional.” His greeting in the post itself plays with the idea of connection between people, but in a mock-robotic way because these connections are being formed via technology. He may also be setting himself up as fallible, and as someone who may make mistakes, just as he assumes everyone else on the site is capable of making mistakes too. He states plainly his outsider status as a collaborative writer, but his desire to do so and to make that collaborative experience “unconventional.” This list he provides in the body of the post, of the four possible genres he’s interested in “mixing” in different ways, gives further evidence to his desire to experiment with his writing. It also gives also members an idea about the kind of writing he likes to do. In other words, Adam’s first post gives other members lots of information for them to get a sense of not only what he wants to do on the site, but also who he is. In a moment of self-exposure and honesty, he opens himself up to other site members. Adam sets the stage for his fellow Protagonize members to connect with him and begin to build a relationship with him on the site, a relationship that may lead to writing collaboratively.

\[^{10}\text{According to his profile, he has done several mixed-genre writing projects, including Western/ supernatural and sci-fi/action, on Protagonize, some of them collaboratively-written, some written solo. This gives further proof of his preference for combining genres in unusual ways and that he's not particularly interested in closely adhering to genre expectation.}\]
Much as Johnson speculates about authorial pleasure coming from the connection between writers and their audiences, Adam’s post suggests that he is looking for a way to establish connections with others. He knows that such a connection will create a situation in which the writing that happens will be “good,” and he suggests that the positive experiences with expects will happen simply because there will be multiple writers working together. His first post also presents one of Csikszentmihalyi’s characteristics for flow experience: feedback. Adam specifically asks for others to not only join him, but to help him “make sense” of his idea and the collaboration he wants to come out of it. This further suggests Bruffee’s notion that the best way to learn about the particular discourses of a community is to allow for students (or, in this case, Protagonize members) to bring in their own experiences with which to build a knowledge base.

The conversations that follow in this thread show a variety of communication moves that work to build connections between the thread’s participants, give feedback and support as they plan a collaboration, and show how they build their own unique community through an overall playful, informal attitude. The first response to Adam’s initial post is from Alice and she responds in a supportive way that also signals her inexperienece with collaboration but willingness to try: “Heyy Adam, it sounds like a good idea. I’ve never done a collab either but I think it would be fun. :)” Alice also signals to Adam, through the use of the utterance “collab” a move to form a smaller, more specialized community with him, one that would use its own language. Adam’s response to Alice is exceedingly positive and excited: “Sweeeet, one in! Any ideas how to mash all those things together to make a story lol, are you into any kind of fantasy?” Alice,
through her admission she has not participated in a collaboration before, presents a commonality between the two that they can build their writing relationship off of: they both want to write a collaboration, but have not done so yet. They can learn how to write one together. Adam’s exaggerated spelling of ‘sweet’ mimics the exaggerated pronunciation of the word one says when very happy for something, and suggests his attitude is one of play and fun toward the prospective writing project. He then follows this excited response with a question about if Alice likes anything in the fantasy genre, in another attempt to continue building common ties between each other.

This first exchange between Adam and Alice, who appear to have never talked elsewhere on the site, demonstrates not only a willingness to learn what to do on the collaboration, but also a desire to build a friendly connection with one another. Alice affirms that Adam’s idea is good and that she thinks it would be fun. Adam, in turn, shows much excitement when Alice agrees to help and opens up a dialog about her interest in fantasy. Alice’s next post demonstrates her desire to work with Adam and figure out a way to make his idea feasible:

Don’t know if we’re gonna be able to mix all of those together. It might be too much … know what, Ima try to convince one of my friends to join. She might not be the best writer ever but she has some really good ideas with storylines and stuff. She might be able to figure out how we can mix them all.

When Alice decides to invite her friend to join in their brainstorming discussion of the collaborative project, she recognizes that one of the components to successful collaboration is have multiple people to share and develop ideas. Bringing in her friend, despite the fact that Alice describes her as “not the best writer ever,” will be beneficial.

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11 Alice's profile page shows she joined July 11, 2009, so she'd only been a member a little over a month longer than Adam when he initially posted this thread. So both appear to be new, inexperienced collaborative writers at the time.
for the collaboration because this other participant is able to do something it seems that neither Adam nor Alice can do: find a way to bring the genres together. Alice’s friend, Brittany, has a particular writing strength where she can create “really good ideas with storylines,” so she seems a good fit for the group. Alice’s ability to reflect on potential weaknesses and think of others who can help also shows that she understands other aspects of collaboration that are beneficial for all writers involved, including a wider range of expertise and skills and more equal division of labor (Day and Eodice 16).

Brittany, as the newest Protagonize member¹², has the most to learn about how to use the site. But her overwhelmingly playful, fun, and friendly attitude makes her an ideal participant within the site’s community. Much of her conversation with Adam and Alice on this thread shows her to be immediately engaged and excited, as she both exclaims and asks questions in her first post: “Alice? Why did you want me to join this? Hi Adam! I’m Brittany. What’s a Colab [sic]? Sorry I’m not very good at writing but I guess I’d help! Sounds like fun!” Brittany’s eagerness, despite her claim that she’s “not very good at writing,” shows that she’s both interesting in learning more about how the site works, such as when she asks what a “collab” is, and thinks that participating in a writing project with others would be “fun.” Also key is her use of the word “collab,” a word Adam uses in his first post as shorthand for “collaboration.” Even though she doesn’t yet seem to know what it is, she assimilates it, to use Bakhtin’s term, a move that helps to visibly show her as part of this small burgeoning community. Alice’s response to Brittany’s first post facilitates support for her, attempting to alleviate her obvious worry that she’s not good enough of a writer to join the group: “Brittany ineed [sic] your crazy mind so that

¹² Brittany’s profile pages states she joined September 24, 2009. So, when she joins this thread, she's been a member for one week.
we can come up with storylines and such. You’re good at that stuff. Any way that we can mix sci-fi and fantasy that you can think of?” It’s key to also note that Alice uses the third-person plural pronoun ‘we,’ a gesture that signals Brittany already being brought into the group. Alice’s post also shows a level of trust, which as Day and Eodice believe, is vital to the well-being and success of all collaborative writing groups. Though Brittany is a new member, with little experience on the site and a self-professed inability to write, Alice already trusts that she’ll be a good member of the group that she and Adam have formed.

The first seven posts of this thread evidence the beginnings of a smaller community within the larger community of Protagonize (Appendix 3). The three participants introduce themselves and begin to enthusiastically converse together, getting ready to develop the idea that Adam initially pitched about a multi-genre collaborative piece. What becomes clear as this thread continues to grow is that Adam, Alice, and Brittany not only form a community around the collaborative project, but they also form friendships. In fact, approximately 63%, or 93 posts, of this thread perform some kind of relationship building, such as Adam asking Alice what kind of fantasy she likes. In fact, 17 posts, or about 13% of the thread, are dedicated to Alice and Brittany talking about specific people or events in their real-life friendship. So while there is brainstorming for the idea, especially during the first two days of the thread, for the majority of the thread’s activity, the participants talk about non-writing related things. For example, Adam is not active on the thread for four days (between October 3-6), and during that time Alice and Brittany continue to post but they talk about things that are going on in their offline lives.
Brittany especially takes to the thread and leaves posts in an attempt to get Adam and Alice, who are not active on the thread for a day, to start participating again:

*knock, knock, knock* Adam!!!!!!
*knock, knock, knock* Alice!!!!!!
*knock, knock, knock* Adam AND Alice!!!!!
O.K. Seriously why are we never all on together?!?!!? If you guys don’t come on soon I’m going to start having conversations with my self again, and we all know what happens with those Alice
“Hey Adam and Alice! Where have you been?”
*it’s starting*

The next post that follows is a long, fake conversation Brittany writes between the three of them which ends with Brittany, alone again, casting a spell to make cake appear (Appendix 3). Both of Brittany’s posts are silly and goofy and clearly done in a spirit of fun and playing around, but they show that, as a participant on a thread that was meant to brainstorm a collaborative writing piece, Brittany has certain expectations of her co-participants, who also act as her audience. She experiences a sense of pleasure from connecting with her audience and knowing that they are there. This sense of pleasure and connection, like Johnson describes it, makes the act of writing more enjoyable, which makes writers want to continue writing. Brittany wants to experience that connection with her friends on the thread so she posts a mock-post that makes clear her desire for the others to respond. Her posts are also a clever parody of the discussion board genre post, demonstrating her knowledge of how these threads function and how her participants are further not adhering (for the time they are not active on the thread) to the expectations of that genre.

The brainstorming that the three accomplish happens primarily in the first two days; for the following two months of activity on the thread, there’s much more of this kind of playing around and maintaining their friendships. But again, those friendships
were important to their writing together, which does eventually happen in the middle on November. Though Brittany and Alice are already friends, Adam is able to build a friendship with them through their conversations on the discussion board thread. He does so from the beginning, as his exchanges indicate. For example, Brittany’s second post on the thread offers her suggestions for possible ways to bring together the different genres he’s interested in writing, and the three posts that follow it show all three of them being excited about and encouraging each other about working on the project:

Brittany: You guys need help mixing sci-fi and fantasy? Easy peasy! Let me think…
What if you did like a futuristic story but with fairies, and wood nymphs, goblins, were-animals, things like that. That way you can incorporate them both.
OR, You could do were-wolf Space people.
Really guys, It’s an imaginary world you’re going to write about, There are no boundaries to what you can write.
XD Is that good or do you need more?
Adam: So definitely randomness will be a big part of this thing! I like where this is going, can anybody think of any sci-fi fantasy series that would be good to parody (harry potter, twilight, etc)
Brittany: WAIT! Twilight Parody? And you want to mix in Sci-fi AND Comedy? Oh ho ho! Give me 5 or 10 minutes to come up with ideas kay?
Alice: XP this is why I wanted you to join Brit.

These posts, all from the first day of the thread, establish that the three members will most likely be able to collaborate well together. They already show much enthusiasm for the project, and are quick to complement each other and show support for each other’s ideas. Brittany’s suggestions may seem disparate, but Adam, with his acknowledgment that “randomness will be a big part” of the story they will write, validate her ideas as productive for the group’s ultimate goals of the writing project. They continue throughout the thread to build trust with one another by supporting each other’s ideas; they also build friendship and community through their playful attitude toward the writing they’re
participating in, a casual, informality that lets them experiment with ideas without any pressure. The connections they build with one another through their writing does eventually led them collaboratively write a story based around their discussion, “The Most Random Thing Ever.” So, for Adam, Alice, and Brittany, the discussion board in Collaborative Corner gave them a space that let them bring their individual writing voices together in ways that show how the site can foster collaborative writing built through community and connection.

Another thread, “Quote Yourself!” (Appendix 4), while not about brainstorming ideas for a story, does function in an important way to help establish relationships between members of the site. Judy, the o.p., appear to want to connect with other writers and thinks that a great way to do so would be by having others share (with any other interested group member) their favorite excerpt from a piece of writing they’ve done. Her initial post focuses on what she believes to be a shared trait amongst writers:

Okay, we all have those moments where we’re writing, then look back at our work and say, ‘Holy marshmallow on a stick…That’s good!’ You know, you were just moving that pencil along the page or typing away, and a wonderful sentence just appears out of nowhere that you’re really proud of. Poetry. Beauty. Awesome.

Her word choice emphasizes the understanding she has that these moments of “holy marshmallow on a stick” are commonly-shared experiences among writers. These are moments filled with pleasure for the writer, when the hard work of creating pays off. Even the light, playful phrase she chooses brings to mind a wonderful childhood treat, roasted marshmallows, something to savor and enjoy. Writing, according to Judy, then, has its moments of absolute decadence and delight for all writers. And like times spent around a fire roasting marshmallows with friends or family, what better way to bring
writers together and reinforcing the sense of community than by having them share their favorite treat with one another.

As a means to establish relationships and possible writing collaborations, “Quote Yourself!” does a lot to help members introduce themselves to others through what they are all there to do, write. By highlighting their own writing, and in particular excerpts each writer especially enjoys and is proud of, and therefore wants to share with others, the members who contribute to this thread use their writing to show who they are to other site members. Others, then, can get a sense of who these writers are and may use that introduction to start collaborations in the future, especially if their writing styles seem similar to their own based on the shared excerpts.

Eric, who is very active in their thread, demonstrates this tendency to let his writing stand in for his own personality, and consequently other participants of the thread acknowledge and support him for doing so. In his first contribution, he sets up his quoted material, thereby allowing members unfamiliar with this specific piece to understand the context for his writing: “This is from a story I’m currently drafting out. This only makes sense if you know that the characters are currently studying at [sic] bracelet in the shape of a snake and trying to figure out what it means. I personally found it exceedingly funny.” He adeptly summarizes the specific scene he’s quoting from, and while users do not get all the characters’ names or a setting, he provides enough information that the reader of the thread can follow the excerpt. By choosing this specific moment from the story to quote, he also gives users a sense of his individual style, both in his writing and his real-life preferences for the type of writing he likes to do and read. This scene, albeit
very brief, carries much significance for Eric, and members can assume that his actual sense of humor may be very close to what appears in his fiction:

‘Guys, come over here! I’ve just made an amazing discovery!’
‘What is it Gwin?’
‘It wiggles!’”

The scene, then, appears to be between at least three characters, and is most likely some sort of mystery or at least has mystery elements because these characters are trying to “figure out” what the snake bracelet means. When Gwin calls for the others to come look at what she’s discovered, her line “It wiggles!” is most likely meant to be a way to break tension within the narrative. When Eric states that he finds this moment to be “exceedingly funny,” he demonstrates that he is aware of, and prefers, moments of comedic relief to disrupt the typical conventions of certain genre fiction. Eric’s preference for moments of comedic relief is further evident in the other two examples he provides on the thread.

The second excerpt appears to be from a fantasy. Like his first example, Eric provides context so that users who read this thread will be able to follow the quote without needing to read the original story. In providing this context, he acknowledges that he has readers on the thread who will not be familiar with the story and will need the information in order to understand his intended effect in the writing. Though he does this with his first post, he provides even more information, such as the setting and the names of the characters, as per the advice of another user, Nancy. Both the conversation between Eric and Nancy about the context and the apparent changes Eric makes to the post show how active users can be on the thread, and the level of consideration that they sometimes provide for other members. Even Eric’s segue into his second post provides
not only more of his personality, one that contains humor as demonstrated through his
use of archaic language choices, such as “methinks,” but a direct attempt at connecting
with other members. He signals them through the use of the second person pronoun,
‘you,’ as in “all of you participating and reading this thread”:

Ohohoh, here’s one from a story I’ve just written! Methinks you’ll like… Setting: A city under siege and a lord has just got into a very heated argument [sic] and insult-match with an enemy of his. They’re trying to decide who it will be that goes out to attack the enemy first. The only problem is that this is gonna be a suicide mission…much to his commander’s dismay.

Lord: “IF THIS CITY IS TAKEN IT WILL BE OVER MY COLD DEAD CORPSE”
Champion: “Correction. Over MY cold dead corpse. You’re not the one fight a horde of angry barbarians.”

Here, like with his first quote, Eric shows that first, he prefers to write different kinds of
genre fiction, rather than more literary fiction. This may be an important preference for
other members to know about Eric when deciding if they would like to collaborate with
him on a work of fiction. His knowledge of different types of genres, in fact, may make
him a valuable collaborator, because he knows how to build and break tension effectively
across multiple genres. How he does this is through well-times comedic moments. As
Eric’s setting description states, in this fantasy, there is a battle going on for control of a
city, one that the Lord of the city obviously doesn’t want to participate in. The Champion,
then, put into the position of needing to go into a battle that will most likely kill him, calls
attention to each character’s role in the story by correcting the Lord and specifying that
he will not be the one to die in the fight. This quip, much like one overheard in an action
film, breaks the tension of the scene in a comedic way. It also implicitly draws attention
to the conventions of Fantasy, and in this case specifically the Sword and Sorcery, genre.
The quote again shows Eric’s in-depth understanding as a writer of these conventions and
how to play with them for certain impacts on his audiences. Within the context of the thread, he is able to highlight his knowledge by selecting specific moments, the ones he particularly enjoys but also that work to show his knowledge of different genre conventions in addition to his own sense of humor.

Whether he intends to or not, Eric, through his participation in this thread and his selection of quotes, initiates different kinds of relationship-building with other members of the site. These relationship-building cues come from both Eric himself, when he addresses other users and their writing directly, and from other users who respond to Eric. For example, after Eric's first post about the characters trying to figure out the mystery of the snake bracelet, two other users provide encouragement in the form of praise. Brittany states, "Hehe, I like it eric!" and Judy, who connects directly with Eric through the use of the @username, says, "Hilarious! Love it!" Though both comments are brief, they connect back to and validate Eric's original assessment that he found the quote to be "exceedingly funny." So Brittany's and Judy's comments each reaffirm that Eric's scene is indeed funny. It also shows Eric that other people think his writing is also comical. What the comments do not explicitly reveal is whether or not Judy and Brittany understand how Eric may be using the humor to break up tension in the mystery.

Eric, too, participates in the thread by commenting on what other users post as their favorite lines from their own work. Nancy, who posts an excerpt from what seems to be a time travel fantasy where a knight comes to a high school in the 1990s to find his bride, states her frustration with not being able to find exactly the right line she wants to post. She "just liked the whole idea of someone being able to write in Shakespearian English naturally." Eric, the only user to respond to Nancy's post on the thread, states,
"Ha ha, writing in Shakespearian English, lol. This sounds funny XD." Through his use of textual cues such as "ha ha" and "lol" and finally the emoticon of the huge smiley face "XD," Eric supports Nancy's idea as a good one, as something to pursue in her writing. This initial reaching out to Nancy may have allowed Nancy to later on give Eric advice on the thread to provide more context with his second quote, the one about the Lord and the Champion.

Nancy: I think you need slightly more context there Eric, so that people know it's the Lord that talks about the corpse and his Champion who's grumbling the second part.

Eric: Hokay, thanks for pointers there!

I fix imminently ... XD

His prompt response to her suggestions shows that he thinks her suggestions are valid. It also shows that he thinks highly of his fellow Protagonize members, and that he wants to make sure that he takes their feedback under consideration. These actions, both Nancy's and Eric's, show that for users to be successful on the site, they need to both contribute and respond to others works and ideas, and they need to respond back when others reach out to them. There is a fine balance between what users receive and give, and those who have the most productive writing most likely also have the most active, responsive relationships with other users.

While it is unclear whether any specific writing collaboration came out of the thread “Quote Yourself,” it does appear that users found ways to connect with each other by sharing their own writing. Another thread, “Help me build an idea,” demonstrates how users interact together through the discussion boards to collaboratively brainstorm and develop ideas. Ryan, the o.p. for the thread, knows that members of this group will be willing and perhaps even eager to assist in brainstorming and planning ideas. Ryan
demonstrates his understanding of how this community works by using the verb "build" in the thread’s title, an active verb that suggests a large undertaking in which others are needed to help see it through to completion. The conversations that take place on the thread also show how users start to “build” connections with each other, in particular through humorous and fun ways.

One social cue that users give to one another to both establish relationships on the site and gain approval from others is through various uses of encouragement. Ryan indirectly asks for encouragement from others the way in which he concludes his first post. After Ryan pitches his initial idea for the story, he asks, "So, what do you guys think? Mind giving me a hand?" This use of direct questioning acts as an invitation to other users. He uses the generic "guys" to signal that any user in the Collaborative Corner group is welcome to join and give their input. He also asks the very casual question "Mind giving me a hand?" that is general and friendly. This isn't a command or a stern request for help. It's a pleasant opening, a gesture that also connects directly to the verb in the title of the thread, "build." Taken together, this verb choice and question give the impression that Ryan truly wants other users' assistance, and he cannot do this writing without them. When others respond to his casual, friendly request, they are giving Ryan the encouragement, and validation, he seeks.

In response to Ryan's initial post, other users show general encouragement. Brittany begins with the positive affirmation "Sounds super cool!!" The double exclamation points identify both her excitement for Ryan's ideas as well as her belief that they are doable. Andy, in his first post to this thread, also shows approval and interest in Ryan's idea: "Time-traveling emails. Haven't heard that one before. Sounds promising!"
Like Brittany, he uses an exclamation point to visually show his interest in the concept. What's also important about his comment is that he identifies what makes it unique, particularly within the time-travel genre. Ryan's new take on this genre makes the story even more interesting, and Andy makes sure to stress this for Ryan.

Referencing genre (such as sci-fi, fantasy, romance, etc.) is another way that users begin to establish relationships on Protagonize. This may be that many of the genre examples the users cite are popular, so more users will be familiar with them. These references then begin to act as a bridge between users, a means of connection that helps users first identify more precisely what type of writing other wish to do and also gives them an idea about their tastes and preferences. In "Help me build an idea," users are quick to introduce tropes from common genre fictions, such as time travel (paradoxes) and popular genre television shows, in this case *Lost*. There appears to be a trend among these particular users where they compare their own story ideas to popular genre fiction tropes, which helps to establish their own ideas for collaborative projects. When they ask for help, as Ryan specifically does in the title for his post, it seems useful for users to bring up comparable popular genres, or even specific titles and series, to help other users more immediately understand what type of story, and therefore what type of collaboration, they want to do.

**Conclusion**

Writing done on Protagonize allows for members to create connections within the community as a whole, with both other members and those members’ writing. These connections are formed, too, through writing. As a writing-intensive site designed with a SNS platform, Protagonize begins to make visible what Bakhtin means by “spheres of
communication.” Members pick up on each other’s languages, the unique idiom creations, and reuse and reshape these phrases in their own “assimilation” of their fellow member’s words. Communities become established through these processes, and the ways in which these communities evolve becomes traceable through the group discussion boards and creative works’ comment sections. These members’ connections enact writing’s social nature. No writing published on the site can be said to function as the works of an autonomous author. The members know that all writing is written for others, and they experience pleasure and fun through the connections their writing allows them to make.

Day and Eodice’s “constellated author” becomes a public entity on Protagonize as well. Individual’s backgrounds and experiences, their preferences, their ideas and opinions, all merge together to form a writing voice that resonates with all the individuals who help create it. Because of the richness of the writing, the community does not seem like a collection of individuals writing “alone together,” but rather finding ways to navigate their individuality with the needs and wants of the group as well. Collaboration becomes more nuanced because of the way that several members come together to mix their ideas. There is an allowance for play, for informality and experimentation, that furthers the ways in which members can build connections (because no one is there is judge or grade them) and experience pleasure (because more often than not, their fellow “Protagers” will be supportive and encouraging of them). On Protagonize, then, it is not just the learning of how to write on the site, how to create collaborations, but it is the way in which these writers bond with one another over the powerful communication of their writing.
Chapter 3: Writing’s More Fun Together: From Discussion Board Game to Collaborative Writing Project

“Hi there everyone, I’m Brian and I’ve decided to hold a kind of unofficial competition of my own here. […]

Now, I want this to be a really good, well thought out piece of writing and more than that, I want this to be a story that actually gets finished. With that in mind, I’m holding auditions for each of the ten characters […]

So, audition away. You don’t have to be the most amazing writer in the world, what is most important in this is that you are willing to stick it out to the end and that you really want to work as part of a team to create something awesome.” — Brian, Protagonize moderator

In the previous chapter, I argue that SNS platforms allow for the emergence of a myriad of connections to form between the Protagonize members, and that these connections lead to relationships and friendships. These relationships, in turn, come to constitute and then strengthen the writing communities that develop within the site. What’s more, through the formation of community-specific languages or, to use Bakhtin’s term “utterances,” emerge, and the use of these emergent languages further reinforce the sense of community between members. Community-specific language and community-specific convention, then, eclipse individual contributions, which, though important, are nevertheless subordinate to the overarching practice of writing. Members pick up, reuse, and reshape established communication modes and new genre forms through the discussion boards, comment sections on creative writing pieces, and other non-synchronous text-based communication options on the site. These various modes of
communication become conventionalized, i.e. members utilize these modes and perceive other members using these modes; and more importantly, as members acknowledge both their own use of and others’ use of convention, as they incorporate these communication strategies and community-specific utterances, they experience pleasure, which as Johnson defines it is the experience of connection felt between writers and their audiences. Relationships establish a community; community creates specific languages; and finally the use of these community-specific languages then cultivates pleasure, which in turn strengthens the community in a cyclical and reinforcing process.

Both senses of pleasure and community keep the members of Protagonize (as it does all writers who experience it, regardless of how they come to it) continuing to write together. What happens on this site is the digital-media platform creates an occasion for self-motivated, self-sponsored, and pleasure-driven writers who accept the identity of “writer” and membership in this community of writers. This behavior are goals we often aim for in our own writing classrooms, yet it happens without any external rewards or punishments systems; it occurs because the members want it to. As members write and communicate with one another, they develop more complexity in their thoughts, which as Csikszentmihalyi explains is the bringing together of two seemingly opposite tendencies: differentiation, or behaviors that move a person towards “uniqueness,” (on Protagonize, differentiation could be understood as a member’s profile page, or a comment on another member’s creative work) and integration, or behaviors that bring an individual together with other people and ideas (on Protagonize, integration could be understood as individuals’ contributions to a collaboratively-written story or threads over a discussion board) (41). The more complex an individual becomes, the more she can experience
moments of flow, which builds both self-confidence and skills, which in turn allow her to become a better community member and better help those in her immediate communities.

In this chapter, I extend and elaborate on the ways in which SNS platforms can enhance the emergence of writing communities, relationships, and a sense of authorial pleasure. My focus here will be on what I see as one of the natural consequences of community formation and interpersonal communication: the creation of a space infused with a sense of play and games. When people regularly meet up together, in either real life or in the various community-infused spaces of the Internet, the propensity for some of the interactions and communications that happen within the community setting will be for these encounters to be playful. When you joke around with a close friend, or even when you meet someone for the first time, the use of playful communication helps to establish and reinforce good relationships. The medium of SNSs actually allows for more games or game-like behavior to develop to the extent that it establishes a context for such interactions while at the same time leaving a space open for what Albert Rouzie calls “serio-ludic” engagement, or an attitude towards work that incorporates both seriousness and playfulness. On Protagonize, such game-like communication happens in the form of writing competitions, in which members write together but also occasionally against one another in a serious way in order to be selected as a participant in a collaboration.

On Protagonize, members learn how the site works through their interactions with other members. New members pick up specific community utterances and use them in their different means of communication with others, thereby strengthening the sense of community and relationship between members. With play and games, this sense of community is strengthened further, as members continue to use both the languages and
communication conventions as well as the medium of the technology (SNSs) to encourage members to participate and write more frequently on the site at distinctive levels of seriousness — the playful to the serio-ludic to the serious. And this is one of the goals of Protagonize: to provide members with a supportive group of self-motivated writers so everyone enjoys the act of writing and wants to write more. This environment additionally allows these writers to receive feedback, which is an essential characteristic of relationships that permit individuals to continue to improve their skill set (in this case, writing) and to decrease the likelihood of them plateauing and consequently falling out of the practice and habit, of which for writing regularity is key.

The epigraph comes from the first post in a Collaborative Corner thread titled “Ten — audition to be part of something amazing.” Brian, a Protagonize moderator, signals both his excitement for his idea, through word choices such as “amazing” and “awesome,” as well as his commitment to seeing this idea through to its final product, with his emphasis on a “finished” story and potential participants being able to “stick it out to the end.” This balance of enthusiasm (which I understand as playful and a choice meant to entice other members’ interest in his idea) and obligation (which I understand as serious and a choice meant to signal to others who might be interested that they will need to have a similar kind of attitude toward the project) adheres to Rouzie’s conception of the “serio-ludic,” a type of discourse that embodies the seemingly incompatible concepts of play and seriousness. What a “serio-ludic” attitude allows writers such as Brian to do is to merge these apparently conflicting stances to allow for more reflective, creative, and directed writing to occur. Moreover, the serio-ludic rhetoric employed by Brian links pleasure with hard work and sustained attention. The non-synchronous mode of
communication used to initiate the discussion and competition/audition for this writing project gives members and possible players in this game the distance needed in order to better understand what’s at stake and consequently to prepare a submission that might be chosen. The use of a competition involving writing auditions further takes advantage of the medium of the technology, specifically the SNS platform used to establish community within the Protagonize site. As a moderator, Brian knows that members are expected, and expecting, to write in order to participate within the community and to get the most complete experience through their membership. In short, Brian establishes his knowledge of not only the ways in which the community works, and how writing plays an integral part of that community, but also how the technology can create a space where users can come together in the spirit of competition that will not only be something serious yet also pleasurable for them, but could possibly enrich the larger community as well.

In addition to the communication affordances the technology permits, the SNS platform clearly demonstrates Ludwig Wittgenstein’s theory of “language games” and showcases the theory’s applicability to writing contexts specifically, mainly that his notion of “language games” suggests a larger understanding of how individuals within a community learn the ‘rules’ for ‘playing’ or participating in the communication ‘games’ of that group. Though Wittgenstein never directly defines his concept, throughout his *Philosophical Investigations*, he develops the idea to suggest a more broadly-encompassing concept that describes the rule governed character of language and communication habits of different communities that evolve over time both through their context and purpose. Generally speaking, once a person in a community learns the ‘rules’
by which their group communicates, that person can join in the ‘game.’ Looking even more broadly on the concept of the ‘game,’ cultural historian Johan Huizinga suggests that games, and by association play, are the basis for human behaviors, predating the civilization of our species as similar types of play can also be found in other mammals. For Huizinga, play is deeply serious and also important for understanding our society. Taken to its logical conclusion, Huizinga theorizes that play and games create order and rules and provide a sense of community, of an “apart-togetherness,” that continues even after the designated play time has ended, and in this way all of civilization can be thought of, in essence, as a game, as play.

Analyzing the function of SNSs generally, and Protagonize specifically, these types of computer mediated communication (CMC) seem to make clear the game-like nature of human communication and relationship formation. As the Collaborative Corner thread “Ten” and its collaboratively-written creative piece demonstrate, when members understand how the rules of communication work, they can effectively use the rules to facilitate community formation through friendly games and competition. While such competition can have serious aspects to it, they are also meant to be fun and pleasurable, providing the same kind of connection and feedback that other types of communication on the site also allow. But these writing games also reinforce and enhance community creation and encourage a variety of writing and participation from members, again one of the central goals of Protagonize.

Before discussing the ways in which play and games happen on Protagonize, and how these behaviors impact the creation and maintenance of communities on the site, it will be useful to establish definitions and the significance of play and games, both within
the mediums of writing and digital technologies. An overview of both the thread and the collaboratively-written creative piece “Ten” will then follow. This will set up the analysis of how the member participants in these specific writing instances demonstrate various levels of play and seriousness, and how these attitudes toward the ‘writing game’ they play reinforce particular community building habits. Play and games on Protagonize become beneficial for writers as they experience more instances of flow and feedback, which in turn help their confidence and identities as both individual writers and unique notes in the larger melody of the “community authorship” voice.

Playing the Language Game: Enhancing Writing through SNS

Play entwines itself with the history of human development and civilization. Not isolated to just humans, play can also be found in other species of mammals. Generally speaking, this is because as an activity, play becomes vital to helping creatures learn different types of appropriate (and not appropriate) behaviors. As Johan Huizinga explains it, “[Play] is a significant function — that is to say, there is some sense to it. In play there is something ‘at play’ which transcends the immediate needs of life and imparts meaning to the action” (1, emphasis original). Huizinga’s study of play, *Homo Ludens: A Study of the Play-Element in Culture*, speculates on its importance within the creation of human society and culture and then how humans recreated play through the development and establishment of their cultures. At first glance, play may seem to simply function as a kind of “intermission” to the reality of life, but through its continual incorporation into our lives, play “becomes the accompaniment, the complement, in fact an integral part of life in general” (9). Because of its naturally interwoven characteristics, Huizinga identifies ten social manifestations of play:
1) Play is a voluntary act
2) Play is a “stepping out of ‘real’ life” into a momentary world composed of its own character
3) Play has clearly defined time limits
4) Play can be repeated, and is often built on repetition
5) Play has understood spacial boundaries
6) Play both creates and is order
7) Play contains elements of tension, uncertainty
8) Play has its own rules
9) Play creates its own community, which continues even after play time is over
10) Play includes an element of secrecy which can further include costumes and dressing up. (7-13)

Huizinga wishes to emphasize that play functions in vital ways that allow us to better experience life overall. Play is an outlet, an alternative space where we can retreat to when needed and focus our attention on something else entirely. But this focusing of attention is not an empty activity. Instead it allows for players to practice at related elements in the real world, so that when they return they are better equipped to handle what they encounter. In Huizinga’s theory, sites such as Protagonize are fundamentally “playful” to the extent that they are spaces set apart from writing contexts individuals will more typically encounter in their “real” lives: emails, memos, classroom writing assignments, etc. This is why he further emphasizes that play can be both “spontaneous” and fun while also “profoundly serious” at the same time (20-21). Humans grow through acts of play; they improve a variety of physical, mental, and social skills that will continuously aid them in their lives.

Social network sites, then, can be understood through Huizinga’s list of play characteristics both as kinds of play in and of themselves and sites where various forms of play occur. As a kind of play, they are spaces that have clear boundaries that make them distinct from ‘real’ life. SNSs also allow for the creation of specific communities to form, which may also be different from the communities an individual belongs to in their
lived life. The members of these communities also have the opportunity to put on virtual masks in the forms of different usernames or handles and visual avatars, which do not accurately reflect the appearances of the individuals in real life. These sites have their own rules, usually created and later re-imagined by the users of the sites to better meet their own needs, so there is also an understood order. While some of these rules may be taken and modified from the real world, they become specific to codes of conduct on the site. Users log on and off the sites, so there is a specific, limited time in which a user plays around in the site world. Finally, much of the activity that takes place on SNSs involves repetition, but there is a kind of tension that users may experience as they wait to see how others will respond to their proffered actions. On a smaller scale, different forms of play can take place within the larger realm of the site, which also would adhere to Huizinga’s list. Examples of these ‘games within the game’ include actual games programmed to run through the SNSs (such as Candy Crush Saga for Facebook), or special interest groups, which form virtual communities and meet up on these digital platforms. SNSs, then, are like playgrounds, and within the virtual playground there are more specialized play sites where users formulate additional rules that help to reinforce their specific and unique communities. Huizinga does not see playgrounds as non-educational spaces where students are set free from the labor of learning but rather as vital sites of and for learning, extensions and supplements to the classroom.

Understanding the rules for play’s conduct becomes an essential piece of knowledge for players of any game in order for them to be successful (i.e., to play the game correctly and receive the benefits for participating, such as building friendships). With regards to SNSs, and in order to understand them as games and as spaces for games
to be played, paying attention to the different ways users communicate with one another becomes critical. In a sense, users play much of the game through their written interactions with others. Ludwig Wittgenstein’s notion of language games helps explain how and why this is. According to Wittgenstein, various “systems of communication” can be considered language games because “they are more or less akin to what in ordinary language we call games” (184-185). Focusing only on complete games or communication systems, these games form their own rules by which the player (or learner) must adhere to or they will ‘fail’ the game (i.e., will not be able to communicate effectively with others who do know and keep to the rules). These games, and therefore their rules, are context and purpose dependent, so within each society, there will be many different types of games, some dependent on the order or pattern of the sentences and words that make them up, some more technical in nature, some more creative.

What Wittgenstein understands as effective and essential means of communication is also the foundation for community formation. For Wittgenstein, the foundation of community is about the connections between individuals who want or need to share information and ideas with one another, and require clear ways in order to do so. Connection is key here. To return to T.R. Johnson, who identifies authorial pleasure as the connection between an author and his audience, when communication fails, the participants feel some kind of loss (perhaps even frustration or anger). According to Johnson, a lack of such a connection could lead to a sense of alienation (for writers, but this certainly applies to any attempt of communication). When enough people experience alienation, communities either break down or fail to form. So, recognizing and understanding the ‘games’ we all need to play in our various forms of communication,
and understanding the rules by which they operate, permit us to experience connection and pleasure. SNSs are simply an extension of the types of communication games we participate in throughout our everyday lives, but they both reinforce and make clear these ordinary games and their rules. We can identify what are appropriate ways to engage with others, the correct responses to what others have said/posted/tweeted, and learn from our own or others’ missteps or miscommunications through these medias. SNSs make connections explicit and because of the nature of online communication they become permanent in a way, allow us to retrace and return to what we’ve talked about with others before and perhaps even reflect on these communications and learn from them.

Writing as an essential component to the game-like quality of SNSs and other online communication continues the association between writing and games. Marie-Laure Ryan traces the history of games, play, and writing in Narrative as Virtual Reality: Immersion and Interactivity in Literature and Electronic Media. She centers her discussion around the concepts of immersion and interactivity, both qualities experienced by the reader of texts. What’s interesting and useful for understanding the games and play-like characteristics of SNSs is her distinction between these two experiences: “Whereas the aesthetics of immersion implicitly associates the text with a ‘world’ that serves as environment for a virtual body, the aesthetics of interactivity presents the text as a game, language as a plaything, and the reader as a player” (16). Literature in the 19th and 20th centuries had the ability to deeply immerse a reader in its story and characters and world, but newer types of storytelling in the 21st century allow the reader to become an active participant in the creation of that world. With writing done through sites that use a SNS platform, the interactivity is built into the site in a myriad of ways. Members
of SNSs that emphasize writing production, like Protagonize, take on dual roles as both the readers and writers of many different types of texts, ranging from written, informal communication to creative projects. Ryan emphasizes that this kind of participation, where the reader becomes a critical part of textual production, “describes the collaboration between the reader and the text in the production of meaning,” as these texts require the reader’s decisions and input in their telling in order to achieve significance (16). The reader, in her participation of the creation of the text and its meaning, now has a goal to strive for, a goal that focuses her attention and energies in positive and productive ways.

With other forms of literature that are reader-participant reliant, the text presents a kind of barrier between the reader and writer. Yes, the reader has multiple choices when constructing the narrative of a digital or new media text, but the reader of that text is still controlled (‘authored’) by those choices. With Protagonize, the medium of textual production necessitates reader-writer communication as well as collaboration. In doing so, it creates a game-like environment where writing becomes a pleasurable activity for its active members. In short, it meets the definition Ryan creates for a successful writing game, which she describes as “a global design that warrants an active and pleasurable participation of the player in the game-world — the term world being taken here not as the sum of imagined objects but in a nonfigurative sense, as the delimited space and time in which the games takes place” (181, emphasis original). Protagonize creates such a specific space or ‘game-world,’ to use Ryan’s term, where site users are not only members but also players. Member activity on the site can be easily scheduled and self-monitored. All the members are part of the larger Protagonize community, and therefore
have a say in and are subject to its rules. But they are also able to create smaller, more specialized communities, which may have slightly different rules based on the larger community rules. Finally, members have the option to set goals specific to their own or their community’s needs. Because of the accountability the community members provide, specifically creating a sense of someone else being there to check up on you and make sure you have completed the work you said you would do, goals can be more reasonable met.

Whatever the goals might be for a community or specific member of the site, the way in which communication happens amongst users in their attempts to meet their goals can be described as both playful and serious at the same time. This phenomenon Albert Rouzie identifies as “serio-ludic.” Seeking to overcome the division between notions of what constitutes work and what constitutes play (and how these divisions have been transplanted onto English departments with the associations of literature studies being playful and composition studies being work), Rouzie believes that the most useful learning blends both: “[Serio-ludic] is interactive and creative, performative and unalienated, and rhetorically significant. Serio-ludic play can achieve both serious and ludic purposes without polarizing one purpose to the exclusion of the other” (*At Play* 37). This mode of writing allows for the writer to experience both a reflective sense (they can think about what they’re doing and why while they are doing it) and pleasure simultaneously. Experiencing pleasure, Rouzie states, “is important to play, because a playful approach cannot thrive when the composer is primarily focused on external rewards and punishments” (7). Much of Rouzie’s discussion focuses around different kinds of CMC as used in college composition classrooms, including MOOs, and he
concludes that such low-stakes, collaborative forms of digital communication become useful and vital for students learning the rules of college writing.

When applied to the kinds of writing Protagonize members engage with, serio-ludic rhetoric helps us to see that this environment can also help self-motivated writers in a setting outside the classroom. It allows them to set the level of participation and particular goals to their own comfort levels. The SNS platform provides a familiar setting in which they can lessen the chances of feeling alienated and out-of-place. Members can build connections with others as they learn the site rules through their various forms of communication. They experience challenges but in a supportive way; they can decide to join in friendly competitions with one another in a variety of writing-focused exercises. The feedback others give them and they in turn give others, allows all participants to experience a flow-state in which writing becomes more pleasurable, where their skill set is being challenged and they improve rather than staying the same and stagnating. In short, Protagonize is a model of community building that college writing instructors should consider as they focus their pedagogy on student-centered classrooms.

**Overview of “Ten” Audition and Creative Work Data**

All data for this chapter was selected from the discussion board thread “Ten — audition to be part of something amazing” found on the Collaborative Corner group, and the collaboratively-written standard branched story associated with it, “Ten.” As with the data collected for the previous chapter, I selected “Ten,” both the discussion board thread and the creative work and its comment section, because it had multiple member participation and was no longer active. More specifically, though, the threads and comments sections appeared to emphasize the game-like quality of writing and
communication frequently done on Protagonize. Even the plot for the creative work itself centers on a ‘game’ (albeit a rather morbid one). I wanted to see how these individuals worked together to write the piece, especially given Brian’s interest in completing the project and then seeking a publication outlet. There seemed to be very specific goals that would focus the work of the community, and I wanted to see if these goals would carry the members through, if they could succeed and how, and if not, why that might have been.

The Collaborative Corner thread “Ten — audition” first started March 1, 2010. The original poster was Brian, who is a Protagonize moderator. Brian’s purpose for starting this thread was to announce his desire to hold an “unofficial competition” to find authors to collaborate with on his story idea. While he does not detail the story idea on the thread, he does link to the story page he created on the creative writing part of the site. His idea synopsis there is as follows:

Ten people are contacted from around the world with an incredible offer. Do they want to play a game? The rules are simple. Given no information other than their names they have to find and kill each other. The winner is the last man standing and gets whatever they want as a reward. A house, a car, a new life rich and powerful. The love of their life. The child they lost returned to them, even from death. They’ve seen the proof that in the game they can win whatever their hearts desire, but at the end of the day, can they kill for it?

What Brian wants to do is hold auditions for each of the ten characters he has created and written basic backgrounds and motivations for (these are also found with the synopsis on the creative work). These auditions do not appear on the Collaborative Corner board in full, but as links to the creative publication part of the site where the members have published and tagged their works as part of the official “Ten” auditions. These ten
characters are: Michelle Sanchez, Godfrey De Vries, Elias Heikkinen, Tony Blake, Kamali Ncube, Ebisawa Hitomi, Alexi Bogdanov, Yu Mei, Thiago Torres, and Vahide Younan. Though Brian clearly has a sense of what he imagines these characters will be like, based on the descriptions he’s created, he is also interested in participants’ unique take on them. Therefore, he is very encouraging of members who are interested in auditioning to be as creative as possible with their development of the characters. The discussion board threads totals 85 posts from 18 unique users, three of whom are fellow Protagonize moderators, over the course of 25 days. Out of the ten authors who auditioned and were eventually selected to participate in the collaborative writing of the story, eight of them appear on the discussion board thread. The thread ceases activity on March 24, 2010, which is the date of the last post.

The story “Ten” started with Brian posting a foreword on April 18, 2010. The story runs 34 branches (pages) long, with each branch devoted to a single character. The word count totals 30,021, and the entire story has been viewed 127 times, with the total views (which include each individual branch’s views) at 3,944. Individual branches may have more or less views: “Tony — Garbage Day” has the least views with 33 and “Michelle Sanchez” has the most views with 310. One can speculate, though, that the amount of views depends on the date in which the branch was published in relation to the beginning of the project. So, “Michelle Sanchez,” the first character page, was published April 19, 2010, one day after Brian published the “Foreword” to the project. However, “Tony — Garbage Day” was published January 3, 2011, nearly nine months after the start of the project.
The frequency with which the participating authors posted also decreases over the course of nine months. In the first month the project started, 14 branches were published, with the first 10 branches coming from each participant’s audition piece. After the first month, the frequency slows to about three branches published per month (June - September 2010) to two per month (October and December 2010, January 2011), with no new branches appearing in November 2011. The final branch of the story, “Godfrey De Vries — Learning the Rules,” was published January 19, 2011, and its view count of 127 suggests that interest in the piece was starting to increase again. However, no new branches have been published since. Despite a decrease in published branches, the member ratings for each branch generally stays consistent over the period of active publication to the project, with each branch averaging about 4.64 out of a possible 5 member-generated ratings.

The comment section for the entire story was generally active over the run of the project as well, with 148 comments. The first comment was posted April 18, 2010 and the last comment on October 19, 2011. About a third of the comments are from Protagonize members who read the story and want to give either “Praise” (eleven member comments labeled as such) or general suggestions for each branch, such as pointing out spelling or syntax errors. The rest of the comments were from the members who were collaborating on writing the story. Approximately a fourth of the collaborator comments were labeled as “Praise,” which shows that not only were other members of the community interested in and supportive of the writing project, but the fellow collaborators were just as encouraging of each other. The other three quarters of the collaborator comments were either generated from the author of a specific branch, often
with a brief explanation or rationale for their submission, or were from their collaborators, offering advice for revision. Much like the advice from the community members, the collaborator advice focused a lot on clarity and grammatical errors, though some of the conversation happening on the project’s comment section between the writers also dealt with the mechanics of how each character’s branch was working toward the achievement of the project as a whole. For example, when Laura added the second branch for the “Michelle Sanchez” character, she moved the narrative timeline forward by two and a half days. Brian mentions in a comment on her branch that she needs to consult with the other collaborators on their private discussion board about this jump in time. Another member of the collaboration, William, also responds on Laura’s branch to not only say he’s fine with the timeline, but to offer other compliments and praise for Laura’s branch. So while there is no direct access to the private discussions that took place between the collaborators on GoogleWave (the now-shelved collaborative editing platform), the type and tenor of the discussion happening can be glimpsed throughout these comments.

Finally, a brief summary of the total run of the collaborative story should help to contextualize the comment analysis to follow in the next section. Each of the ten characters’ first story branches introduces them, their background circumstances, and the moment when they receive notices, either in the form of a note and a real confrontation

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13 While I did not have access to this private discussion board used by the Protagonize members who were writing “Ten” together, the comments left on the public spaces of Protagonize, including the Collaborative Corner thread and the comment section for “Ten” did provide a clear idea to the kinds of issues and idea these members discussed privately. Frequently, as noted above, the public comments make direct reference to what the members discussed privately. However, to provide an even richer sense of what these members focused on in their brainstorming and prewriting sessions, as well as the general tenor of the community they created, it would be beneficial to read these discussions.
with someone, about the “game.” Michelle Sanchez is an American and a divorced mother of two. Her daughter was kidnapped and has now been missing for three years. When she receives the note informing her about the game, her reward for winning is that her daughter will be returned to her. The Dutch banker Godfrey De Vries is a recent prison escapee; arrested for money laundering, he worked out a plea deal where he gave up his criminal connections for a lighter prison sentence. Living under a bridge when he receives his note, he is promised a completely normal life again, including all his previous wealth, should he be successful in the game. Elias Heikkinen is a sixteen-year-old computer forensics student in Finland, who also sells stolen credit card information. In Elias’s attempt to put someone on a national terrorist list, the persons running the game show him how his actions are traceable. If he plays and wins the game, though, all traces of his activity will be erased. Tony Blake, a British police officer, lost his wife during a terrorist attack, and though her body was never found, he assumes she’s dead. However, after he receives the note about the game at his office, he also receives a phone call made by his wife, with her saying that she’ll be returned to him if he wins the game. Kamali Ncube, a twenty-one-year-old Zimbabwe architect, was recently diagnosed with breast cancer. At first, she dismisses the note about the game, but when her cancer returns, she begins to wonder if the note-writer can live up to his promise of a cure.

The other five characters have similarly depressing or desperate situations that make them prime participants in the game. Ebisawa Hitomi is a one-hit wonder Japanese pop singer who is now addicted to heroin. The promise made to her if she plays and succeeds at the game is she will become famous again, and can either have her addiction cured or fed. Alexi Bogdanov is a young, struggling Russian performance artist who is
also promised fame if he wins the game. Yu Mei is a Chinese detective in the Shantou Police department desperately trying to find a serial killer who killed her goddaughter. When she receives her note about the game, she is also given images of the killer, with a further promise that she’ll be given enough evidence to arrest him should she win the game. Working as an enforcer for a Brazilian drug baron, Thiago Torres desperately wants to escape his life. When his young son finds the note about the game and a prize of being relocated to the United States, Thiago is at first skeptical, but soon reconsiders. Finally, Vahide Younan is a Turkish prostitute who also wants to escape the harsh conditions of her life. When a client informs her of a way to do this, by killing nine other people, she decides to agree, knowing that if her pimp found out, he might kill her.

“Audition Away:” Collaborative Writing as Play and Games to Reinforce Connection

The members who participated in the auditions for “Ten,” as well as those who choose to simply offer praise or suggestions for the creative project, already knew how communication and writing functioned on Protagonize. These were experienced members, several of them moderators, who had written extensively on the site and in some cases, with one another. So, unlike the newer members in some of the Collaborative Corner threads analyzed in the previous chapter, who were learning the rules for participating, communicating, and writing on the site, these individuals already understood how to play the game of Protagonize. Therefore, they could effectively use the rules to facilitate community formation through games that would create a situation for friendly competition, one that is both serious and playful, and one that could allow for
members to improve as writers through extensive feedback and the experience of pleasure as they connect with a variety of readers.

Brian’s first post for the thread “Ten — audition to be part of something amazing,” demonstrates many similar characteristics to other threads on the group’s page. His initial post briefly explains his idea, with a link to the story’s page on the creative writing part of the site. However, what distinguishes this post from many of the other threads on Collaborative Corner is that Brian doesn’t just want other members to collaborate with him on the development and writing of this story; he wants these members to audition to be a part of a team. In other words, Brian seeks to create a specific community dedicated to working on his idea. The purpose for the audition to participate lies in the fact that Brian wants members who will be just as excited and committed to writing this story as he is. In his initial post, then, he establishes several rules and guidelines that will shape other members’ responses, integral components, according to Huizinga, for play. For example, he emphasizes both a particular standard of quality and completion of the project that suggest other collaborative creative writing projects on the site may not always have: “Now, I want this to be a really good, well thought out piece of writing and more than that, I want this to be a story that actually gets finished.” By providing these guidelines right away, in the first post of this thread, he sets a more serious tone to let members know what type of attitude and level of participation they should expect, should they successfully audition.

However, his initial post also shows that Brian has a playful, less serious attitude toward this audition and writing project as well. He understands that being too serious may be off-putting to members who participate on the site because they have fun doing
so, sharing their writing with others and making new friendships through that sharing on the site. He still manages to reemphasize important parameters for participation, though, but in a way that achieves a balance between being both serious and playful:

So, audition away. You don’t have to be the most amazing writer in the world, what is most important in this is that you are willing to stick it out to the end and that you really want to work as part of a team to create something awesome. Who knows, we might even make money from this too down the line (which would be split evenly of course).

More importantly I want to see lots of auditions. Auditions can be collaborative or not and even be carried on being developed after the main story starts, regardless of whether you make the cut or not. It’ll be awesome to see other peoples [sic] ideas grow out of these seeds, so no audition is a waste, even if it doesn’t win you a place in the group.

So read the authors guidance and start auditioning people! I know I can count on you!

Much of his language here suggests that Brian sees this project as having a potential to be a lot of fun, and more generally, to build larger communities of writers off of this idea. He offers encouragement for those who may be hesitant about participating (“You don’t have to be the most amazing writer in the world”), and gives further guidance about how to write these auditions (“Auditions can be collaborative or not”). What’s even more interesting, and telling of his overall approach to pitching his idea, is that he imagines that auditioning will be useful and fun for even those who do not ‘win’ a spot on the writing team. In fact, this seems to be another aspect of the project, and the larger community he envisions developing around the project: other member’s writing “grow[ing] out of these seeds, so no audition is a waste.” This language of encouragement is important for Brian as a means of introducing his story idea and getting members excited to participate and audition because it makes these members feel
welcome. By creating a playful, yet serious tone in this post, or using Rouzie’s term, by incorporating a “serio-ludic” approach to the creation of these rules and guidelines, Brian establishes the type of community he thinks will be most likely to succeed in producing this story. He also signals to other members these expectations, so they know what he wants and audition accordingly.

The member response to Brian’s idea is very positive, with several members posting that they thought Brian’s story and the way in which he wanted to execute it was great. One member, Will, before declaring that he would audition, said “I seriously can’t stop smiling. This is such a cool idea.” Another member, Eugene, who auditioned for the character Vahide, wrote, “Most excellent :) Looking forward to the results and all the stories that will carry on outside the main one. I think a lot of people have become really attached to their characters (I know I have).” These responses demonstrate that the members who read Brian’s thread understood what he wanted to accomplish in this project and again, knowing the rules is essential for play to happen (Huizinga). Eugene’s post in particular exemplifies exactly what Brian wanted to have happen: that the members who auditioned would enjoy writing and developing these characters, regardless of if they won a spot on the writing team. In response to Eugene talking about members becoming “really attached to their characters,” Brian says,

Yes, I do hope some, if not all, the entrants continue on with stories of their own if they happen not to make it into the final group. That’s half the appeal of running this thing - seeing what awesome things come along and how they progress, regardless of whether they’re part of the main story or not.

Because of the public space in which Brian initiated and is having these discussions with multiple members, he shows that he assumes there is a larger audience reading these posts. So, in agreeing with Eugene and reaffirming what he said in his initial post, he
demonstrates the community-oriented nature of his game within the larger game-space of Protagonize. His comments, along with all the other participants on the thread, work to build this community through serio-ludic conversations. Picking up on Brian’s tone and attitude in that first thread, the other members mimic Brian’s playful yet serious attitude. They show that they’re excited about the game/audition, and the larger creative project it will lead to, and were all determined to try their best to win, but in a spirit of friendly camaraderie.

In addition to general positive responses, several of the participants on the board asked for clarification on the rules of Brian’s audition game, some of which extended into larger questions about how the writing of the story itself would happen once the ten participants were chosen. These questions spanned a variety of concerns, including issues about the game itself — how long the auditions were to run, when and how they’d be judged, how winners would be contacted — and the story and writing — would members get to write for more than one character, how could secondary characters be created, and so forth. Brian responded to all questions within a day of their posting, and even other members, when a newer participant would join the thread, began to answer questions that Brian himself already had. For example, Jeff, who auditioned for and won the character Godfrey, asked Brian to more explicitly define the time commitment he expected of those who won: “This sounds absolutely awesome. I really may have a go at this. Just one question: what do you mean by commitment? A chapter a day? One a week? Less often than that?” Jeff begins his question by first offering praise for Brian’s idea, along with a statement that suggests he’ll participate. However, he clearly wants to know what Brian expects of the writers he chooses to collaborate with. Brian gets back to Jeff the same
day, and clarifies what he means. As for how often the writers chosen to participate will need to write, Brian’s answer suggests he has given thought to the various kinds of lives his collaborators might have, and has come to what he believes is a reasonable amount of writing time: “Well a comfortable posting rate is yet to be decided. Everyone that gets through will have a different pace they find suitable and differing levels of other commitments in their lives […] I imagine a post a day on the story, meaning that each individual author posts once every 10 days would be a rough guess.” By defining what he means by commitment, Brian can set the expectations as clearly as possible, but also with an amount of flexibility, so potential collaborators can audition knowing full well what they are agreeing to.

Creating and setting the rules both for the audition and the writing of the story are important to effectively participate on the site. Brian, as a Protagonize moderator, understands these conditions. He’s also very experienced in writing on the site, so he can create rules that reflect his knowledge of what has worked on the site before and what hasn’t. The fluidity of rules and communication on this SNS platform permit these kinds of subtle changes, which get passed along through the other members via channels such as the Collaborative Corner group discussion boards and the creative writing author guideline and comment sections. Brian’s continuation to Jeff’s question regarding time commitment shows how he has learned from his previous experiences and seeks to create certain rules for what he hopes to accomplish to make the writing more successful:

The main thing I mean by commitment though is staying power, a commitment to seeing this through to completion and not just giving up or disappearing without a trace. If you plan on joining in on this story I’d like you to be sure you can stick it out until the very end. Of course, some characters will die earlier than others but I’m sure there will be other, secondary characters and what not people can write for, plus the general plotting and discussion the whole group will take part in too.
Either way, if you want to be a part of it, you have to want to see it through to completion.

That’s pretty much all I ask.

The thoroughness of his answer suggests that Brian wants to make sure there are no misunderstandings between himself and the other members who are actively participating in this audition. His repetition of the phrase “see it through to completion” paired with other phrases like “staying power” and “stick it out until the very end” emphasizes the kind of writer and Protagonize member he’s seeking to be a part of this collaboration. He is not looking for someone who will not take this seriously, and his use of such phrases demonstrates to others his level of seriousness. Brian wants to complete this story; it is not meant to be an exercise or a practice at writing a collaboration.

However, built in with this serious attitude is a desire for community, and part of how he imagines this community working includes being able to work well together, to be supportive of each other in all the stages of the writing process. This desire can be seen in his stressing that, though some characters may die, thereby meaning their writer might be out of the writing game, there could be other opportunities with writing for secondary characters or continuing participating in the “general plotting and discussion the whole group will take part in.” Brian’s own commitment to forming a stable community can be seen in his first post, where he states his long-term goal for this project is publication, either self-publishing or through a publishing company. He imagines working together with the group he’s selected to “edit it and polish it until we are happy that it’s perfect,” and then, after it’s published, he will “personally buy all 9 contributors and [himself] copies of the book.” Brian muses that “It would be really cool” if each
writer sends their copy of the book to each other for them to all sign, suggesting that this finished book signals the bond of their community.

Member questions, and Brian’s consistency to answering those questions quickly and completely, reinforce the community-centered ideology of Protagonize. In order for writers to be successful as collaborative writers, they need to have clear expectations, concrete rules and order, to follow. They also need to be sure that those they are working with understand and will adhere to these rules. When smaller, unique writing communities form within the larger site, such as the group Brian sets out to create, these communities, too, reinforce the goals of the site as a whole. Brian, in his specific definition of time commitment and expectations for those who will write this story, establishes not only an individualized community, but also accountability for each of the writers. To play the writing game he has created, Protagonize members must be willing to play by these rules. Brian, in his balancing of both enthusiastic, playful language with serious language, is able to successfully make his expectations clear. Not only are those who participate engaged with him and others on the board, but also they appear to know that the parameters Brian’s set-up will make them both better writers and better Protagonize members.

Another characteristic of a successful Protagonize community member is that he or she knows the importance of feedback and knows how to give feedback to other members. One of the criteria Brian creates for this writing-game audition is he will provide feedback to every member who writes an audition piece. Some of the specific writing questions members ask him could also be understood as requesting feedback as
they plan their auditions. Matt, who auditions for the character Tony Blake, asks Brian for suggestions on how to conclude his audition:

I’m wondering how I can write in proof for Tony Blake that they can return his wife to him without simply repeating the end of your opening chapter for Michelle Sanchez. A picture or video of her proving the date that it was taken would be a bit too similar, really - I don’t really want to go down the severed fingers route. It just doesn’t seem to work. There’re probably loads of ways to prove it to him, but apparently I’m googling the wrong thing heh.

I can’t believe I’m asking for help on the tryout chapter, but I just don’t want to repeat something.

Matt’s question shows several important considerations and reflections he’s thought about which demonstrate that he’s taking this audition seriously. First is his concern that he is writing an ending that too closely mirrors Brian’s own sample audition for the character Michelle Sanchez. He wants to submit original work, but he’s also concerned about it fitting in with the character image Brian has in mind. Finally, he appears self-conscious about asking for helping on his “tryout chapter,” but Brian quickly encourages and helps him with his response:

Hey no worries, it’s a good thing you’re asking for help. When all the authors are picked, we’ll be working together and helping each other out anyway so there is no harm doing so now.

Now, you could go with actually having his wife deliver the letter herself or phone him and tell him in person over the phone. You could have him wake in bed next to her, she tell him the terms of the story, and then him getting blackbugged and waking up with her gone except for some traces of hair, etc. Perhaps something like that?

Like with previous member questions, Brian is very supportive and encouraging in his response to Matt. He emphasizes what he imagines will be the tenor in the group that will form from this audition, and lets Matt know that it’s important to feel free to ask questions. Also, Matt’s question might be one that other members who wish to audition
are struggling with, so by using the discussion board to publicly address his concern again shows that Brian frequently considers his audience. He gives Matt several possible ways he can change his audition’s conclusion that suggest to Matt more precisely how he imagines the character of Tony. This public guidance is important because for members who will be selected as part of the collaboration, they can see the kind of feedback that Brian provides. In other words, they can begin to get a sense for what he will expect of them in terms of the feedback they provide for each other.

Once the deadline has passed for audition submissions, Brian announces the winners and soon after, he provides explanations for why each was selected. He chooses to post these publicly, on the discussion board, for all the members who participated to see his reasons for choosing who he did. He promises, though, for any member whose submission was not chosen, that he will provide feedback to them, explaining why he didn’t choose their audition. As for the winners, Brian decided because of so many strong submissions that he would not write for a character himself, but instead “take on the role of any additional major characters that may or may not be introduced and act as director of this little group.” Each member whom he selected to write for a specific character gets a paragraph posted on the discussion board thread. Here, I will look at Brian’s explanation for why he chose Ian to write for the character of Vahide Younan.

All of Brian’s explanations for why he chose a certain member over others to write for a character are very specific and honest, but his decision to have Ian write the character of Vahide rather than Eugene is very telling because both members talked about and to each other on the discussion board. When Ian first learns that Eugene has also submitted an audition for Vahide, he says, “Oh crap! I was going to write one for Vahide
Younan. This is not cool, Eugene. Every competitive entry I’ve put in on Protagonize has been outdone by something of yours! (I’m not actually mad.) I still might try it out. I will avoid reading your try-out to avoid any influence.” Ian, a regular member of Protagonize, is obviously familiar with Eugene’s (who is a Protagonize moderator) writing and has had his writing competing against Eugene’s before. The aside of “I’m not actually mad” shows that Ian admires Eugene’s writing and even likes the idea of being in a competition against him. Instead of being swayed from auditioning, he uses this as inspiration to write something, but being careful to avoid any unintentional “influence” from Eugene’s own interpretation of the character. Ian’s use of serio-ludic communication to Eugene, again in a public space on the site, shows that he’s excited but determined to put in his best. On another level, Ian’s public post about Eugene as a competitor signals to Brian that there is perhaps more at stake in this character’s audition because these members have gone up against one another before. When Brian ultimately chooses Ian’s submission, Ian is very surprised and again, takes to the discussion boards to express his thoughts: “I’m shocked, but flattered. I’d have picked Eugene’s.”

Looking at Brian’s reasoning for why he chose Ian over Eugene, he admits “It was an incredibly tough decision.” He focuses on how each member developed the character of Vahide to be “very strong,” and states that each participant created an audition that portrayed the character in similar ways. However, there were specific characteristics that Ian gave Vahide that put him ahead of Eugene’s audition:

What I liked in Ian’s Vahide was the fact that she knew what she was and what she was doing. She didn’t entertain any illusions or self-pity, instead accepting her lot and doing her job and living her life. I found myself falling in love with that matter-of-fact attitude. Miller, a secondary character Ian introduced, also sold it for me, acting as both an interesting character and an interesting departure from the other offers by being a face-to-face meeting. The thoughts on the story, in
terms of a possible organisation behind it all, the character of Miller, Ian’s particular flavour of Vahide and how that matter-of-fact attitude would play out with the other characters in the end tipped the scales in Ian’s favour.

Brian highlights several specific features of Ian’s audition that gave him an edge over his only competition. Though Vahide is a prostitute under the control of a violent pimp, Ian gives her a strong demeanor, an awareness that allows her to accept the invitation to play the game Miller gives her. Miller, as a secondary character Ian invents, also makes his audition stand out, since all the other nine participants had their characters receive their invitation in the form of a note from an anonymous source. Finally, Brian notes that he liked the ideas Ian gave on the larger story arc. Ian’s particular choices for how he would develop the character and Brian’s story idea signal his ability to understand what Brian wanted to accomplish both with this character and the larger story. His choices, then, show he figured out how to play this game successfully.

Conclusion

Looking closely at the “Ten” Collaborative Corner discussion board thread and the comment section for the creative piece, these Protagonize member interactions focus on a larger issue of communication. Communication can be understood in two ways: the first might be called the media or informational way, the idea that we communicate to transmit knowledge or information between minds or memory banks; the second is more a sociological theory, an understanding of communication as a process by which we come together and thus the process by which communities come into being is emphasized. Communication as the delivery of information is less interesting for my project than communication as the process of establishing communities. Nevertheless, the threads and comment sections on Protagonize, along with the various other forms of non-
synchronous communication, demonstrate aspects of both these types of media and sociological characteristics. And these characteristics can suggest new possibilities for both Huizinga’s and Wittgenstein’s important works.

With Huizinga’s theories, play and pleasure are essential components for communication and community formation. Through play and its related emotional experience, pleasure, humans learn how to express themselves to each other and to inform each other. Play creates practice situations in which individuals learn correct modes of expression that allow them to connect with others on a deeper level.

Wittgenstein’s theory, while not focused on pleasure or play, uses the metaphor of the ‘game’ because inherent to games are rules and all communication has rules the participant follows, or adapts, or ignores, each decision with certain consequences. However, bringing Huizinga’s understanding of play into conversation with Wittgenstein’s theory of language shows how the ‘game’ of language production can be understood better as a site of pleasure. Both language games (Wittgenstein) and the pleasure these games entail (Huizinga) are necessary for the establishment of community, for the execution of communication in both senses of the word outlined above. Language and communication are epiphenomena of learning and following collaboratively-established rules. In short, we get pleasure when we learn to communicate because we build bonds with those in our communities. Our messages are delivered accurately, practically speaking; we experience pleasure at this success; in this way, we are drawn together into communities.

Communication is a game which when we learn how to play it right becomes a pleasurable experience. It is the game that brings us all together under a state of
belonging. It stops us from experiencing alienation. It creates an order to our lives that has a potential for great elegance, rather than the chaos of miscommunication and isolation. Though “Ten” as a completed story ultimately did not fulfill the expectations of its creator and the collaborative group that worked on it, the project does show the goals and ideologies of the site as a whole: community, connection, collaborative creative writing, and pleasure through all these coming together.
Conclusion: Status Update to Term Paper: How SNS Could Allow Student Writers to Collaborate and Have Fun

“Although it remains largely invisible and inaudible to us, writing development occurs regularly and successfully outside classroom walls.”— Anne Gere, “Kitchen Tables and Rented Rooms”

When I was in fifth grade, my teacher had our class write and share creative pieces once a week. Sometimes these were on topics she chose for us. Sometimes she let us write whatever we wanted. Already a writer who enjoyed poetry and fiction, I loved this part of the school week. I loved hearing what my friends wrote. These stories were often silly or strange. My perspective on these stories would be different today. As a creative writing instructor, if one of my students wrote something like these stories I would see them as riddled with plot holes or lacking character development. I would be much more critical of them. But as a child who simply enjoyed writing, I loved all writing, and did not think twice about such issues. I wrote frequently at home, on my own, for fun. I usually didn’t share anything I wrote with anyone else, a habit that would stick with me through high school, college, and graduate school, despite being expected to share my work more and more. However, when I was in fifth grade, after my mother brought home a collection of Rudyard Kipling’s *Just So Stories* from our local library one weekend, I got inspired to write my own tale. I was so excited and proud of my story — which explained the origins about how toads got their bumps — I decided to use it for my creative submission for school that week.

Imagine my surprise when the teacher not only read my story to the class, but afterward passed out a copy of one of Kipling’s stories to all the students. After we
listened to her read the Kipling story, she asked each of us to write our own Just So Story. It was an exercise that many, if not all, the students really enjoyed, as they picked their favorite animal or plant or place to write their own ‘origin story’ for how it came to be. A few days later, after giving us time to revise, the teacher gave everyone the chance to share their stories, and then, as was common, she collected them (being written on large lined paper) and displayed them on the board outside the classroom, so any one walking past could stop and read the collected mythology for different aspects of our world.

I share this story because I think it makes clear what Anne Gere discusses in “Kitchen Tables and Rented Rooms: The Extra Curriculum of Composition.” Gere emphasizes that frequently, and with all kinds of different groups with people from a wide variety of backgrounds and skill levels, writing education takes place outside the classroom walls. For my younger self, I recall much reading and writing taking place outside of school, at home with my great-grandmother’s old books and my own stories I liked to write for fun. When I chose to share my writing with others in a school-setting, I got to see firsthand how my own “extra-curriculum” composition learning helped the curriculum planning of my innovative and flexible fifth-grade teacher. She saw an opportunity to give our class an activity that would not only be useful and appropriate for us as young writers, but would help to strengthen the sense of community already strong in the class. Taken together, in both their sharing in the classroom and then their display for the larger elementary school community, these stories created a kind of alternative worldscape for us, a way to imagine and explore the whys and hows of things that interested us. For me, this experience reinforced my desire to be a creative writer.

Whether or not my teacher was aware of it, her actions of creating a writing prompt
inspired by my own personal, extra-curriculum learning (and not just the praise of my story) validated what I was doing. It made me want to write all the more; the group activity of writing and sharing stories made me want to write with others, too.

While it may be impossible, as adults, to recreate this same kind of wonder and acceptance in the act of telling stories that we may have experienced as young, learning writers, it is not impossible to find ways to connect with other writers in the spirit of practicing and sharing this art. Protagonize, then, offers a space for non-professional, “self-sponsored” (to borrow another term from Gere) writers to develop their own supportive communities, to learn from one another, to inspire one another, and to find ways that make writing more pleasurable through connections with others. Community, pleasure, and connection are essential components, I believe, for writers to have in order to produce texts.

Both inside and outside the academy, the pressure to effectively communicate our ideas to others can often impact our abilities to accomplish this goal of textual creation. But within the context of a group, a community, one that provides feedback and encouragement for us to keep trying, this anxiety and alienation that writers may often come up against can dissolve. As Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi explains the nature of experiencing pleasure while participating in an activity, at the time of participation, it may not feel “particularly pleasurable […] but afterward we think back on them [the experiences] and say, ‘That really was fun’ and wish they would happen again. After an enjoyable event we know that we have changed, that our self has grown: in some respect, we have become more complex as a result of it” (46). Another way to understand this growth and complexity of ourselves through these experiences is a boost to our self-
esteem, which can be strengthened through participation in groups. Gere acknowledges that, in the writing groups she examines, “Despite their inexperience, workshop participants gain confidence and begin to think of themselves as writers” (76). This distinction in how a person understands herself — as a writer, in this case — is one of two important consequences of writing groups. I believe the second important consequence — an establishment of a “community authorship” built around the connections between members — can only happen once the individual writers feel confident in their own unique abilities, so that they can contribute to the creation of a larger group “author14.”

As writing instructors, it is important, I believe, to create a classroom that allows students to identify as writers. When students are asked to be the producers of original knowledge within an academic context, this is a new and often daunting task. The figure of the ‘academy’ is a looming presence and can make those not accustomed to its languages and expectations feel alienated. However, given the growing presence and importance of different types of computer mediated communication (CMC) and mobile communication in all of our lives, and especially in the lives of the “digital generation” to which our traditional-aged students belong, it is necessary for college writing instructors to find innovative ways of bringing these technologies into the classroom. These are spaces in which students are already knowledgeable about the writing practices and expectations, and are spaces in which they feel comfortable working in. In order to be

14 See footnote 8. I use the term ‘author’ here because ‘authorship,’ for me, suggests a multiplicity that I believe comes through in collaboratively-written works on Protagonize. Learning to become a writer on the site is an integral characteristic of Protagonize, because writer suggests a kind of lived practitioner, someone who can be identified and engaged in a discussion about their work specifically, or writing more generally.
successful writing teachers, and help our students learn to see themselves as writers, implementing different types of writing, in particular collaborative writing, through a SNS platform can help students bridge the (sometimes tremendous) gap between their current abilities as writers and the kind of writers the university and later their professional careers will ask them to be. The lesson of Protagonize for writing teachers is that community and pleasure can be leveraged to create an occasion for non-writers to self-identify as writers and to produce texts for specific audiences who will give feedback, feedback that reinforces and drives the entire writing process and roles of members as both readers and writers. It’s important, I believe, for students who do not otherwise consider themselves writers to learn to see themselves as such because this gives them another connection to the writing they do and the community they belong to (in this case, other novice writers). When they identify as writers, the composing they do becomes infused with personal significance, and when they are working in a community of other writers, they will want their peers to experience similar kinds of significance with their writing, too.

To conclude, I will present both considerations when reflecting on the possibilities and limitations of digital media and digital writing. Popular writers like Nicolas Carr and Sherry Turkle believe that our increasing reliance on digital technology is changing our culture as well as our minds. We don’t communicate or read like we used to, they argue. However, I believe that, while important to be critical of new technologies, in particular those with which we are increasing incorporate into our daily lives, it’s also productive to think about practical and productive ways of bringing these technology-based emergent communication practices into classroom settings. Not only are students already proficient
and literate in using and writing with them, but we can also use them in such a way that
students become more reflective about how they change (in both positive and negative
ways) their communication styles and even relationships with others. I will also present a
concept for a SNS platform that could be used in writing-centered classrooms and even
across colleges campus-wide. With the use of SNSs in classroom-settings, it’s necessary
to consider other issues, such as plagiarism and grading. By keeping these issues in mind,
and allowing students’ input with how software design and writing assignments could
intersect, the writing classroom can evolve to allow for more student community
development and confidence to grow. In this environment, students will not only become
successful writers, or writers who can produce texts, but they will come to find the entire
act of composition as a pleasurable, enjoyable process.

**Should this technology be used in college-level writing courses?**

Over the past three years, it has become a more common sight for me to walk into
my classroom before the start of class and see all my students absorbed by their phones.
Whether they are checking text messages, checking their Instagram feed, or playing a
game, the types of activities that consume much of their time are usually social in nature,
meaning that they are staying in touch with those they know, even if they do not see them
face-to-face. This is not to say that they are not social with their peers and friends in the
classroom space — simply put them into groups to have them start rapidly conversing
while also working with each other on the assigned prompt. But the prevalence of
different digital and new media technologies has some critics concerned about how our
skills in various socializing and communication situations are changing. How do we read
now with Internet surfing replacing television surfing? How have attention spans been altered? How are interpersonal relationships shifting?

According to Nicolas Carr, the use of digital and mobile technologies has led to reading and attention spans that are much shallower than they were before. In his article “Is Google Making Us Stupid?” and later popular bestseller *The Shallows*, he uses the forefather of media studies, Marshall McLuhan, to present both an argument and warning against our increasing use of newer digital technologies. Carr believes, via McLuhan, that the media itself determines the basis for our thinking patterns, the manner in which our brains process information, and not the content of the media. So, with print culture, our thinking and attention stay focused on one specific artifact, such as a book. A reader’s attention would be held by a book, its plot and characters, for its length. With new digital technologies, however, a user’s attention can become highly dispersed — skimming several articles, having multiple conversations across messaging platforms, writing emails, watching videos. The media of the Internet allows for this kind of distracted, fractured attention. Carr sums up what he believes is happening to our minds in this way: “Calm, focused, undistracted, the linear mind is being pushed aside by a new kind of mind that wants and needs to take in and dole out information in short, disjointed, often overlapping bursts — the faster, the better” (“Is Google” 10). The mind of an individual who reads a print book can focus more than the mind of an individual who aimlessly clicks through websites. Why this matters, believes Carr, is that with a loss of focused attention comes a loss of meaningful socializing ability. Why bother to pay attention to the person sitting across from us at dinner if we can scroll down our Twitter feed?
Carr’s realization and acknowledgment that in fact his own ability to concentrate on a lengthy article or book led him to write against the dangers of too much use of these new technologies. Sherry Turkle, in *Alone Together: Why We Expect More from Technology and Less from Each Other*, also seeks to have us pause when reaching for a smartphone. Turkle argues that though we believe our advanced technology has allowed us to become more connected to each other, in fact, the opposite has happened, that we are now “alone together.” This phenomenon of being “alone together,” much like Carr’s concern with our shrinking attention span and loss of a reading culture, signals a decline in our civilization. She cautions that our increasing reliance on these technologies (such as smartphones or Facebook wall posts) has started to debilitate our interpersonal communication skills and our ability for personal reflection. Her portrait of how we use Internet technologies to maintain perceived close connections with others is both troubling and sad: “The ties we form through the Internet are not, in the end, the ties that bind. But they are the ties that preoccupy. […] We don’t want to intrude on each other, so instead we constantly intrude on each other, but not in ‘real time’” (280). Turkle’s image of a future shaped, in large part, by our technology dependence is one devoid of real human contact, a collection of archived memories in the form of text snippets and filtered images. Carr and Turkle feels a sense of unease about what our future may look like, no matter how beneficial these technologies might be to society in other ways.

While it is certainly important to consider the negative consequences of habits that could develop from using these technologies, bringing digital technologies into classroom settings could, in fact, permit our students to become more reflective and thoughtful about their technology use. While I do think that Carr’s and Turkle’s claim should be
taken seriously, I do not think this means that technology should be banned from classrooms. It is unrealistic to assume that all our technology use with disappear now that it has been ingrained so thoroughly in our society. So why not acknowledge the criticisms and help bring an awareness to the use of technology, starting in the classroom and then expanding to the larger non-academic community. Instead of viewing technological advances and their new communication strategies they provide as alienating, as a means of creating a culture that is “alone together,” why not help technology’s users understand it’s potential for us to be “together alone” when we cannot be “together together”? As a site that provides strong evidence that technology can, in fact, bring people together rather than isolate them, Protagonize, and its use of SNS technologies demonstrates that people can write together, and build communities, friendships, and connections, across the divides of physical space and time. When members use Protagonize, they experience it as being “alone together,” rather than “together alone.”

Additionally, these students, and all the ones to come, will be ‘digital natives,’ and will expect more technology use to be a part of all their college experience. For us as instructors, there can be many benefits to doing so. Cindy Tekkobe, Yazmin Lazcano-Pry, and Duane Roen believe that students are able to engage in course material more actively though the incorporation of various digital media, which allows for a “kind of hands-on sharing that is not possible in a traditional classroom. This kind of sharing, showing alongside telling, decentralizes the role of the instructor, who is then free to act as an expert practitioner” (“Collaborative Learning” 88). If one of our goals as writing instructors is to create student-centered classrooms, then finding ways to bring in digital technologies, with which students feel comfortable using to connect and write with
others, is a way to facilitate this. Furthermore, there are many other benefits to using digital media in classrooms. It simplifies collection and evaluation of student-generated material, creates more instructor time and eases the transportation of materials. It also allows students to better manage their own time and work load. In an even broader sense, incorporating digital technologies permits us to reach a larger potential student body, including non-traditional students and working adults, improves accessibility and retention rates and finally, it allows students more options to customize their educational experiences (88). One of the most encompassing benefits of using digital technologies in the classroom is that they allow instructors to better meet the needs of a wider and more diverse student population, hence making education more easily accessible to a variety of students.

As digital natives, many students today have grown up with newer technologies and have found multiple ways of bringing them into their daily lives. Much of this technology use includes games, such as those played individually but shared socially (like games developed for Facebook) or Massively-Multiplayer-Online-Role-Playing-Games or MMORPGs (such as World of Warcraft). Students’ proficiency with these games have led to what Albert Rouzie considers an expectation by students for there to be more playful interactions and assignments in classrooms. Again, incorporating playful activities can be beneficial in learning environments because “the metacommunicative function of play helps the participants see it as play, thus installing a potentially useful distance through which those involved can achieve some understanding of the situation” (Rouzie 81). To use games and game-like digital environments, like those found on SNSs, can allow writing instructors to develop assignments that will push students to
hone their rhetorical and reflective skills, their critical thinking as well as their critical reading skills. They can understand the moves they make as players of a game, working with and against other students to achieve specific goals. Students can question themselves about why they played as they did, how it created certain expectations from their peers, and why those peers responded in the manner they did.

In fact, many of the games played online today have much writing and therefore include many of the same rhetorical devices that we as writing instructors are asked to teach our students. Jonathan Alexander argues that “at the most basic level, gaming involves complex use of multiple modes of writing and a need to develop a sense of how text and visuals interact; many games provide a rich environment in which gamers are developing and (pardon the pun) playing with a variety of complex literacy skills” (“Gaming” 36). When paired with writing, play and games lets students not only learn how to communicate their ideas to others, it lets them develop relationships with others; writing as a game provides students with opportunities to build connections. Collaborative games especially let students develop literacy skills that allow them to become savvier to their audiences and what’s at stake with different communicative strategies. What’s more, Rouzie sees play as “the fertile field out of which shoots creativity” (19). Play creates a kind of informality that allows for writers to more openly experiment, to try things out, with their writing. With the softened of parameters, of rewards and punishments, comes more expression and joy in the act of composing. When students are given a chance to complete assignments either as collaboratively or individually but with the support and encouragement of their friends and peers, when they are asked to reflect carefully and thoughtfully about how writing down through
digital platforms and with new technologies evolves the process, they become part of a larger cultural question that writers like Carr and Turkle have popularized. Students can bring their insights into classroom spaces and become more active in the development of writing assignments and technologies that will allow them to expand their creativity and writing skills in ways that will be continuously useful throughout their lives, both personal and professional.

Possibilities for Incorporating SNSs into Classroom Practice

But what would a writing game look like in a writing classroom? How could a SNS platform be utilized to build community either in a classroom or across a university? More writing instructors, in composition and creative writing classrooms, have begun to incorporate Facebook, using the ‘Create Private Group’ option to supplement classroom discussions and assignments. However, what I imagine would be most useful and potentially fun for students would be to use a SNS designed specifically for university use. What I propose could be developed for either an Internet-based SNS or a mobile app (or preferably, both for the most access).

A university-targeted writing-intensive social network site\textsuperscript{15} would contain many of the features already found on popular SNSs such as Facebook and Twitter. However, it would be distinguished from these non-academic sites by its focus on academic and creative writing contexts, genres adapted to the university writing scenario. Each user

\textsuperscript{15} Compared to commonly-used academic classroom organization software, such as Blackboard and Moodle, this SNS technology would stress more explicitly the connections between students. The familiarity of the platform would also permit students who may feel alienated by the idea of ‘academic work’ a space that would allow them to be more focused on idea-creation and experimentation, or playing around with, their ideas. The emphasis on connection made between classmates through writing, paired with the greater freedom of expression, makes use of a SNS platform a good complement to other, more standardized academic technology use.
would complete a user-profile with a selected avatar (which could be a real photo or another image he/she believes to best represent them). Users would create lists of people they know within their university and would build groups that would be targeted for specific writing interests, such as thesis-driven essays, personal reflection essays, creative writing (poetry, short story) and other more specialized writing skills and genres deriving from specific disciplines. One can imagine groups such as “Poets” or “Technical Writers (Computer Engineering)” or “Grant Writing.” These public groups would work as bridges between a variety of students, spanning years, disciplines, and specific classes. Student-created groups would allow students to create ‘unclassroom’ spaces, spaces where students can decompress, discuss ideas in an environment without the pressure of grades, and can fully be a writer rather than a student (as they would be in an actual classroom).

University professors and instructors would also be encouraged to participate, filling out a profile as well, but also maintaining a private class page. The class pages would be by invite only and could also have a discussion board where class-prompts could be posted and used to start or continue class discussions. Files and assignments could also be uploaded here as well. The purpose of the private SNS classroom group would be to reinforce the classroom community. Students who may be unfamiliar with one another at the beginning of the semester could quickly acclimate to each other through the incorporation of the discussions on the SNS. The SNS also provides a type of writing-intensive environment that digital natives will be very comfortable working in. For first-year or non-native students, this could provide additional support as they adjust
to college life and the expectations, such as participating in group discussions, which come with it.

Writing could be conceived as a game on either the classroom specific group pages or the student-created group pages. Students or professors could give different kinds of writing challenges to others, such as number of words per day, writing for a certain time, or completing a specific prompt. When students complete these challenges, they would earn a reward or level up. These would be visually represented with unique icons that could appear on a main activity feed (for a challenge completed) or next to a student’s avatar (for what level they have achieved). Such challenges would not only motivate students to write, but would reinforce community relationships and make the writing process more fun and enjoyable. Other types of writing-intensive games could be created to run through the SNS, like role-playing games or puzzle games. Students in classrooms like computer coding or game design could also work on class projects to design games for the university writing SNS. Projects like these could be linked to composition classes that the students would also take, with connected assignments that would ask students to like critically and reflectively about the types of decisions that go into the designing of the games. An interdisciplinary, multi-class project like SNS game design would emphasize writing skills and concepts, like audience, outcomes, and responses, while also providing applicable real-world skills students would use in their careers.

Finally, this writing SNS would be used by students to critique their work, either written for a class or for their own enjoyment. Workshops for composition or creative writing classrooms could be held on the SNS, with the professor posting the guidelines and monitoring the work done between the students. Also, students could seek out others
to critique their work, with comments ranging from superficial sentence-level proofreading to more substantial content revisions. In either scenario, different types of communities would be created and maintained, with different kinds of moderators put into place depending on the kinds of writing be done within the specific community and the overall makeup of the community. So, for example, if a community was interested in working on creative work not associated with a specific class, the community of students would decide on one of their own members, perhaps an older student with creative writing experience, to act as moderator. Conversely, if a group was going to focus on writing done for a specific class, then that class’s instructor should act as moderator or the instructor could assign different students from the class to moderate the content to make sure no plagiarism or other forms of cheating were happening. Students would meet others, either in classes or through the public student groups on the site, who, if helpful, could become regular critiques. Like with the games, such workshopping and critiquing would reinforce key rhetorical and writing skills. Students would also get the help from others with differing perspectives (such as personal and educational backgrounds or different writing styles) which will allow them to understand the impact their writing has a certain audiences. More broadly, this kind of writing practice would have the potential to reinforce the larger campus community. Students might develop writing friendships with other students who they would never have met in classes because of a different major or class year. The potential for campus community development would be greatly enhanced by operating a SNS that would give students a central presence and emphasis on the communal-oriented nature of ideas and writing practices.

**Ethical Considerations and Grading with SNS Writing**
Despite what I see as many advantages for incorporating SNS technology as cornerstones of composition and creative writing classroom praxis, there are two considerations — ethical and grading — that also need thorough thought, reflection, and discussion. Collaborative writing instruction and assignments present challenges with regards to plagiarism and accurately assessing each individual’s contribution and assigning accurate grades. What might be the ramifications if these same collaborative assignments move to online classroom SNS spaces or even larger university SNS environments? Would students be more likely to cheat, to steal others’ ideas and pass them off as their own? Finally, how would issues of access and use be addressed?

Developing SNS platforms for use in college writing courses would mean a reexamination of many long-held ideas about writing, in particular ideas about the solitary author figure. SNS writing would necessitate the formation of community authorship, of pieces that interweave numerous writer’s ideas and voices. Rebecca Moore Howard’s concept of “patchwriting” is useful in understanding the writing that may take place in such an environment. Howard’s “patchwriting” describes the process in which student writers find ways to incorporate others’ ideas into their own, albeit in a way that may not always fit with standard academic practices. But “patchwriting” is nevertheless useful for student writers because it allows them to find their own way into the kinds of writing expected of them in the university setting. The kinds of writing that happens on Protagonize could also be considered patched-writing, as the individual discussion board threads or branches of a collaboratively-written story actually show the way that the different members’ writing pieces together to form the larger conversation or plot. Individual contributions are rarely isolated but always taken together with the whole to
see what they add to the story being told. SNS patched-writing could work in similar ways in classroom settings, where students reflect together about how an assignment came together (or didn’t) through the weaving of all the contributions. This kind of reflective thinking could further students’ understanding of the value of their own writing, and how it improves within the context of the group.

With grading concerns, it would be necessary to set clear expectations for the use of the technology, how assignments should be turned in, and firm deadlines. Tekobbe, Lazcano-Pry, and Roen caution that “the digital space, in its unbounded ability to produce instant and simultaneous interaction, without clarification, can unrealistically shape student expectation and undermine the integrity of the instructor, instruction, and space” (89). Instructors should feel comfortable in both using the technology and creating assignments with it. In other words, they should be users of this technology, because as users they can better set reasonable expectations for what can and cannot be accomplished with it. Incorporating SNS technology and writing into classroom spaces would also benefit from input from the students. Having them be part of the decision-process, including what will be used, in what ways, why and how it will be assessed, can help them to better understand the opportunities and limitations of the technology. Being part of this decision process will also give students a feeling of agency in their education, and allow for a more truly student-centered class environment to form.

A final concern is access. Not all students have access to computers or the Internet outside the university setting and should not be expected to purchase such technologies. If these technologies will be incorporated in classrooms effectively, considerations need to be made for these students in a way that would allow them to participate fully and gain
the experience of using the technologies, both for forming connections with other classmates, for writing, and for more general use of the technologies. A solution would be to give enough time during the classroom for the online work to be completed and to balance any online components with work that can be done offline (e.g. in-class, face-to-face group work, hand-written reflection or response papers that could be used to spur online writing done in the classroom, etc.).

The use of SNSs in writing classrooms, I believe, can only spur discussions of collaborative work, writing as play and games, and broader understandings of what it means to be a writer/author. It can allow for more self-reflective writing assignments that let student-writers consider how the technology changes and shapes their writing and their relationships with other writers in their immediate classroom community, larger campus community, and beyond. SNSs technologies in the classroom demonstrate the many ways that students become writers, and by bringing these technologies into the classroom, we as instructors validate our students as writers. Students should feel comfortable when asked to write; they should be able to work with their friends who help them to write, and write more often; students should understand writing as a social phenomenon.
Appendix 1
“Help me build an idea?”
Posted to Collaborative Corner group

Ryan posted January 29, 2010
I've been working a bit on a dream I had, and I'm trying to turn it into a story. I've got a basic plot worked out, as well as a fair idea of some of the characters, but I'm having trouble getting everything down pat and connecting B to C and even coming up with A. (As, with many dreams, I was just suddenly in the fray.)

Two teenage friends (one boy, one girl) are receiving strange emails every three days, just a random string of ones and zeroes, and the sender is always invisible. The boy tries to decode it, saying it must have some meaning, but the girl pays little attention to it at all, saying it's just a random mess.

She begins to worry about him when he starts losing interest in school and spends every moment he can trying to crack the code. Two weeks after the first message she confronts him, but he just grabs her hand and drags her up into his room. On his screen is the first email, and he says to just watch.

When he's done, he's decoded the ones and zeroes into a cryptic message, depicting the shooting at a grocery store the day before. When she gets angry and asks what that's supposed to mean, he reminds her the message was weeks old. The message was from the future.

And I can't say anything more without spoiling too much. :P

So, what do you guys think? Mind giving me a hand?

Brittany posted January 29, 2010
Sounds super cool!! Is it a collab? 'Cause if it is, I would totally love to contribute! :)

-Brit xo)

Andy posted January 29, 2010
Time-travelling e-mails. Haven't heard that one before. Sounds promising! I might collaborate on it if given the opportunity.

Ryan posted January 29, 2010
Haha well, that's the thing. I'm still working with the idea, and I was asking for a little help getting some of the ideas straight. What I have up there, minus the really bad spoilers I had to leave out, is all I have. I don't have a reason how or why the emails are coming back in time, I don't know who's sending them, etc.
Andy posted January 29, 2010

Maybe it's a paradox? Heh. They could have sent it to themselves. I think it's at least worth throwing the prospect around, if only for for humour's sake, leaving it to be disproven.

Here are some questions that popped into my head.

Is it time travel or prescience/prophecy/foresight?
If it is prescience, is this foresight possessed by a human or by some sort of artificial intelligence?
If it is time travel, did only the data travel back in time? And in what way? Is there a device that projects waves of information back in time? Or was it in solid form, like a USB key sent back in time?

How best can this be made different from the movies and books already out there about patterns predicting events?

If it's 1s and 0s, that's binary. A video file broken into binary? That might be a very large e-mail, depending on the video's pixelation and length.

Does the video feed have a datestamp?

Will posted January 30, 2010

Man, I love this idea, and I really like the paradox theory.
Maybe it was the kids who shot up the grocery store.
This oddly reminds me of LOST...
I'd be very much in if this were to take off.
Pre-destination paradoxes are the best type! Haha.

-Will

Ryan posted January 30, 2010

I like the sending it back in time to themselves, that's good. But I don't think these kids would shoot up a grocery store.

And time travel I think would be the most fun, you get all kinds of paradoxes to work around and, well, I can just see it being entertaining.

You've got the grandfather paradox mostly. (You know, if you go back in time and kill your grandfather before your father is born, you can't be born, so then you couldn't have gone back and killed your grandfather, but then your grandfather lives so you could, but then you couldn't have, and on like that.)

Also, playing with the whole concept of time will be fun. Does time branch? If these are coming from the future, can they change the future that the messages are coming from, or are they only making an alternate reality? What will happen if, then, in the future, they
don't send the messages back to themselves? Or change the messages?

Yes the 1's and 0's are binary, but I've got a little something after that I think would be a bit of a spoil, but I'll tell you all if you wanted to hear. Though, any ideas are appreciated, and nothing is set in stone.

And lastly.... Lost is epic. ;)

**Will**

posted January 30, 2010

The tension is killing me, despite only finding out about this story this morning. Let's get started. Aah!

And in regards to the 'the kids shoot up a grocery store' thing, maybe they're told it's them, can't believe it, but then are forced to for some reason or another. Maybe they can't stand the idea of becoming killers, and so go to kill their future selves, who aren't actually there... I don't know. Never mind.

I love the grandfather paradox. Seriously. Do this story.

-Will

**Ryan**

posted January 31, 2010

Ok, I'll get started on the first chapter.

Of course, keep the ideas coming everyone, even if there's no way whatsoever it can be used in the story ideas spark more ideas, and they spark even more, and on and on, and something is bound to be useful.

EDIT:

First chapter's up: [http://www.protagonize.com/story/time-flow](http://www.protagonize.com/story/time-flow)
Appendix 2
“Looking for People to Collab With”
Posted to Collaborative Corner group
Dates: November 12, 2009 – November 18, 2009

Greg  posted November 12, 2009
I'm thinking about starting a new collab about a magical realm that can only be reached by selling your soul to the devil. The realm would be better than the regular world, and the people that live there are better off.
If anyone finds this interesting and thinks they would be interested and helping with this, comment below.
P.S.
I'm also looking for other stories to contribute to. If anyone knows of a good one, suggestions are always welcome!

Brian  posted November 12, 2009
I might be interested in that come December (too busy with NaNoWriMo at the moment!). As for collabs, I have a fair few stories that are open to collaboration that I'm more than happy to have some contributors on, just check out the stories on my profile, if it's open, your welcome to join in.

Denise  posted November 12, 2009
I would be interested (although I'm not very good at collab's) But hey i'll love to give it a try! =)

Greg  posted November 12, 2009
I'm pretty busy with NanoWriMo too, but I seem to enjoy doing things to stress myself out.

Adam  posted November 12, 2009
i'd love to help, can i get some more information on it or is that as far as you've got lol

Brittany  posted November 12, 2009
Never done a collab, and I'm not that good at writing, but I would love to write in this!!!
I'd also love some info, and if you don't like what I write, you can just tell me to not write anymore, I won't be offended :)
Oh and is it gonna be rated mature? XP
-Brit xo)
Steve posted November 13, 2009
Yeah, I'll have a go. Send us a link!

Brittany posted November 13, 2009
Oh yeah, that would be helpful, I'm with Steve on the link thing!! Me too please!!

Greg posted November 13, 2009
In response to Brittany, no I don't really want it to be mature.
In the story, the devil takes the form of a businessman in a suit. He knows what people want, and can either come to them, or let them visit him. We can throw in a few demons and angels to make things more interesting, and of course some humans that get led astray.
And the link:
http://www.protagonize.com/story/the-house-of-the-devil

Brittany posted November 13, 2009
Hmm . . . now do you want us to make up like Chracter sheets, like what we do in roleplays? Or just jump in.
And does he just show up as a man in a business suit? Or is he a legit. Businessman with a company and stuff, cause I could play with that XP
Thanks a bunchies!
-Brit xo)

Greg posted November 13, 2009
Just jump in. If I have questions I'll ask. He is actually a businessman, which is part of the reason he can find peoples' souls to steal so well.

Brittany posted November 13, 2009
Ok, just one question,
Can I be like the stressed out Human Secretary for the real world company? Cuase I was planning that, just want to make sure that's ok though :P

Greg posted November 14, 2009
That's fine as long as you have some idea about where you want to go with that. If you do, I don't need to know what it is, I'll just trust you to take care of it.

Brittany posted November 14, 2009
Ok Thanks!
Greg posted November 14, 2009
Alright then. GO FOR IT! Whooo!

Brittany posted November 14, 2009
XP

Greg posted November 14, 2009
Yeah. I'm pretty weird.

Amy ADVICE posted November 18, 2009
It sounds like a really interesting idea. But my only advice is that you never plan a story start middle and end. Just write it as you go and let it take you where ever possible, just follow your instinct, stories often turn out better this way.
Appendix 3
“Ok, i don’t work well in a team, but hear me out”
Posted to Collaborative Corner group
Dates: October 1, 2009 – December 7, 2009
Selected posts from October 1-4, November 11-15

Adam posted October 1, 2009
Hey fellow humans.
Ever since i joined Protag i've looked at Collabs and wondered how people worked together in a team like that, allowing other people to mix their ideas with their own. I would love to try a collab with somebody, but i would like it to be unconventional, mixing the following:

-Sci-fi
-Fantasy
-Comedy
-Parody?

I think it could work out to be a fairly good idea with a little help from others, so if anybody wants to have a go at this with me then reply and see if you can make any sense of this with me.

Stay safe, Adam
:D

Alice posted October 1, 2009
Heyy Adam, it sounds like a good idea. I've never done a collab either but I think it would be fun. :)

Adam posted October 1, 2009
Sweeeet, one in! Any ideas how to mash all those things together to make a story lol, are you into any kind of fantasy?

Alice posted October 1, 2009
Mainly write fantasy. Faries and vampires and and all that jazz :P Don't know if we're gonna be able to mix all of those together. It might be too much ... know what, I'ma try to convince one of my friends to join. She might not be the best writer ever but she has some really good ideas with storylines and stuff. She might be able to figure out how we can mix them all ..

Adam posted October 1, 2009
I love that jazz ;), that'd be great, i think that we could maybe do a fresh take on a few different genres, i love satire and parody... what about writing a sort of scary movie/ epic movie sorta thing, if you catch my drift? Parody twilight etc, theres a lot of stuff around i'd love to have a poke at!
Brittany posted October 1, 2009
Alice? Why did you want me to join this? Hi Adam! I'm Brittany. What's a Colab? Sorry I'm not very good at writing but I guess I'd help! Sounds like fun!

Alice posted October 1, 2009
Brittany ineed your crazy mind so that we can come up with storylines and such. You're good at that stuff. Any way that we can mix sci-fi and fantasy that you can think of?

@Adam Twilight Parody huh? Sounds perfect XD

Adam posted October 1, 2009
Hey Brittany, another one on the wagon! SCORE! lol sorry :S
I would love to take a whack at Twilight, the vampire genre has most definitely outstayed it's welcome. I think sci-fi and fantasy go hand in hand if you know how to get them to work, but i definitely think a parody story would be great. Have either of you watched any parody films? Epic movie, Scary Movie etc?

Brittany posted October 1, 2009
You guys need help mixing sci-fi and fantasy? Easy peasy! Let me think. . ..

What if you did like a futuristic story but with fairies, and wood nymphs, goblins, were-animals, things like that. That way you can incorporate them both.

OR, You could do were-wolf Space people.

Really guys, It's an imaginary world you're going to write about, There are no boundaries to what you can write.

XD Is that good or do you need more?

Adam posted October 1, 2009
So definitely randomness will be a big part of this thing! I like where this is going, can anybody think of any sci-fi fantasy series that would be good to parody (harry potter, twilight etc)

Brittany posted October 1, 2009
WAIT! Twilight Parody? And you want to mix in Sci-fi AND Comedy? Oh ho ho! Give me 5 or 10 minutes to come up with ideas kay?

Brittany posted October 1, 2009
Oh. My. Gosh. I just looked up parody so now I know what it means! Like making fun of twilight right! Ok. Now I'll have some good ideas.

Alice posted October 1, 2009
XP this is why I wanted you to join Brit.
Brittany  posted October 1, 2009
XD I'm here to help!! And read obviously:P

Brittany  posted October 1, 2009
Can I follow the Twilight story line but make it totally f-ed up. It's gonna be kind of like that robert munsch book baby alligator. Sound good? I've just got an outline so far.

Oh wait have either one of you read all the twilight books? Cause I have so you might get screwed up and there might be spoilers for the next movies *GASP* unless you don't plane on seeing them

Alice  posted October 1, 2009
AHAH you're ridiculous. PS i cant read your writing for history ... :S

Adam  posted October 1, 2009
I don't, and i've watched the first film, but i'm not a big fan lol, i'd like to add some elements of other books. I like where this going!

Brittany  posted October 1, 2009
Yeah sorry, see I'm not even good at copying stuff! I couldn't read my own writing when i had to look up vocab. for science either :P.

Anywho I'll tell you a bit of what I was thinking but it's really out there so if you totally shoot it down i'll totally understand.

Ok so this is only going by twilight but name other books and I'm sure we can incorporate them or start over.

So Stark *Edward* (I know Alice, Edward doesn't deserve that name), I hope we all know who that is, Is the Jock at highschool and he's really sneaky and all (I'm basing him off of Jacob [bella's best friend who's a werewolf] in the 4th book cause he keeps making blond jokes and it's sooo hilarious, so i think that would add alot of comedy).

Stella *Bella* is a TOTAL Nerd and she's blonde so edward can have fun with taunting her.

Then they realize that they're in love when they touch eachother's bare palms together during a handshake to say sorry when they get in trouble cause edward used his vampire powers to hang her to a basketball net XP.

Then they get married. . .blah, blah, blah, blah. . . and have a mutant kid from like mars or something cause it's not edwards kid it's this weird guy who like got bella pregnant by touching her cause he's an alien.

THEN They have a big fight with all the aliens from planet something-or-other (I'm not good at names) and Renessee(renesme in the movie you wouldn't know if you haven't
read the books) Is taken away to their planet of something or other and they all live unhappily ever after.

O.K. So it's not very good at all and I'm hugely regretting posting it but maybe we could incorporate parts or I'm perfectly fine with totally starting over. Sorry Adam, I kind of have a HUGE imagination, or I guess you could say I'm really good at screwing with things that have already been written to make them weird or stupid or funny. most of the time though, like this one, they're stupid.

Brittany posted October 1, 2009
Yay that's my longest comment EVER! XD

Brittany posted October 1, 2009
By the way I don't think we can ruin Harry Potter. I mean with Fred and George it's already a Parody. It's so funny!

brb in 30. gotta go eat!

Adam posted October 1, 2009
I love huge imaginations! That sounds great, and then every so often have Stark turn around and go "Holy sh*t! It's that huge f*kin dragon thing from Eragon!", and then Hermione can throw Dobby the house goblin at it and then... actually, i think thats a good idea, i see where this is going! I love it, good idea Adam. Thank you Adam. :P, keep em coming this is really coming together!

Brittany posted October 1, 2009
Oh my gosh. Alice, I've finally met someone who's mind kind of works like mine! This is so cool! I thought you were going to be like "Wow that girl is sooo weird *barf*" XP

Ok well I kind of want to wait for Alice to read this to so juts wait a while for some new ideas. But I totally LOVE your Idea Adam! It's sooooo cool and funny!! Yay!

P.S. I think you guys should start writing. You could do a colab. roleplay! Alice could be Stella and you could be Stark, Adam! And then I can be Renesee and the alien weirdo guy cause they don't come till later in the story! Or you could do a realy collab. That might be better. Whatever you guys think would be the coolest!

Adam posted October 1, 2009
I do think your weird, in a really cool way! Ahaa, like me, you obviously have the base down, im not down with the whole colab thing yet, but if we each add a chapter and wahtever, then if we want to, go back on them and edit them to hell, like throwing in references or characters from other series? This whole topic thing is slow, Protag needs IM, but do you have MSN or facebook, we could swap ideas on there if you want, this is gonna be good no. 1 spot here we come!
Brittany posted October 1, 2009
Oh my gosh YES! We are TOTALLY going to be #1. Why don't yu give me your MSN and I'll add you cause my comp. has a virus or something and stuff isn't working right so you might add me and I won't ever reply cause I won't get it. Oh by the way Alice is gone. She went to Cirque du Soleil (lucky devil).

[Sixteen posts excerpted for this Appendix]

Brittany posted October 2, 2009
Adam bit my finga!! Adam you bit my finga! OW ADAM!!!

Come to candy mountain adam!!!

ADAM WHERE THE HEAK ARE YOU???

Brittany posted October 2, 2009
oh haha g2g mom wants compbe on again tomorrow!! byeee!! luv y'all! XP

Brittany posted October 3, 2009
*knock, knock, knock* Adam!!!!!!!
*knock, knock, knock* Alice!!!!!!!
*knock, knock, knock* Adam AND Alice!!!!!!

O.k. Seriously why are we never all on together?!?!?! If you guys don't come on soon I'm going to start having conversations with my self again and we all know what happens with those Brittany

"Hey Adam and Alice! Where have you been?"

*it's starting*

Brittany posted October 3, 2009
"Well I've been of doing something totally unimportant" Alice
"Me too!" Adam

"Well, well and you've left me all alone to think of ideas for our collab., Tell Kayla that she did in fact guess your name Alice-

"Wait she did?" Alice
"Oh yes! She got it quite quickly too! I told her that it sounds like Alice! And spook guessed many different spellings, Funny girl! But then Kayla says Alice and alas! She was right!!"

"Yay!" Adam

"Ye Yay indeed Adam but you have also left me to wonder if I have been accepted into Alice's new roleplay and to read thorn wood with no on epsting for, oh it has to have been 2h by now!"

"Oh well I've got to go again!" Adam

"Well then Pip pip cheerio Adam!"

"Hey that's racist! Just kidding, Bye Brit!" Adam

"Yes I think I'll go too!" Alice

"Well looks like it's just my self then. Lonely me. What shall I do?"
*Looks around empty room to see if there is cake*
"No. No cake darn! Wait, I can make one!"

"CAKEIFY!!!!!"
*points at orange chair and gets wonderfull chocolate cake coloured orange that looks like a chair*

"Yes I think I can stop talking to myself now! Good-bye to all!"
*of course i'll still be her though mwahahahaha!*

XP where are you guys?

Alice
Oh. Lord.

Brittany
I was bored and you guys weren't here *looks around shamefully then sighs figuring that it's no use, i'm always crazy*

*rereads conversation with self and bursts out laughing*
*will probably be laughing about it still tomorrow*

[Fifty-six posts excerpted for this Appendix]

**Denise** posted November 11, 2009
(this is random but I found this on the discussions, i was really bored, and you have really funny conversations XD LOL!)

**Adam** posted November 11, 2009
You're telling me... this would actually make a good story XD

**Brittany** posted November 11, 2009
I thinks we should publish it! That would be sooooo sickers!!! Hey Denise, want to join in on this fun fest of funness and random chaos???

**Brittany** posted November 13, 2009
O-M-Gsies guys!! where are you all??

**Denise** posted November 14, 2009
lol random chaos funny :P

**Brittany** posted November 14, 2009
For sure, now, where are Alice and Adam?
Oh and Denise, are you going to join us?

**Adam** posted November 14, 2009
Okay, we need to do something other than wast @nickb's website space XD

**Denise** posted November 14, 2009
sure i'll give it ago! knowing me i'll just mess it up ¬_¬!

**Denise** posted November 14, 2009
srry if i do btw __-

**Brittany** posted November 14, 2009
We haven't even started yet, so I don't think it really matters. I think I'm going to start it though guys! hopefully it'll be ok! But before I do, should we do like roleplays or P.O.V. 's???
Adam posted November 14, 2009
Right, is everybody clear on the plan? Somebody send it to Denise

Brittany posted November 14, 2009
Alice still hasn't edited it and sent it back to you or me Adam! But I'll send the one you sent me to Denise. Denise, what's your e-mail? Don't worry, Adam and I already established that we're not stalkers or anything, I think it's page 2 if you'd lie to read it :P

Denise posted November 15, 2009
my e-mail is _________
:P
anyways this isn't my proper one it's the one I use for websites if you get wat i mean 0_o!
Anyway if u send it to this one i'll read it XD

Brittany posted November 15, 2009
OK :P
Haha oddbodd:P

Denise posted November 15, 2009
LOL! Hmm it was the only thing that fit lol XD

Brittany posted November 15, 2009
Haha wow :P
That's so funny!

Denise posted November 15, 2009
:P lol!

Brittany posted November 15, 2009
:D

Alice posted November 15, 2009
Wow.

Brittany posted November 15, 2009
XD XD
Appendix 4
“Quote Yourself!”
Posted to Collaborative Corner group
Dates: December 20, 2009 – January 10, 2010
Selected posts from December 30, 2009 – January 3, 2010

Judy posted December 30, 2009
Okay, we all have those moments where we're writing, then look back at our work and say, "Holy marshmallow on a stick... That's good!" You know, you were just moving that pencil along the page or typing away, and a wonderful sentence just appears out of nowhere that you're really proud of. Poetry. Beauty. Awesome.

So quote yourself!

And here is a favorite of my own:
"There is a single arrow in my quiver, and I promise you I will not miss."

Patricia posted December 30, 2009
In my story, Dream of Violet, the very first two sentences that I positively love are:

"She cannot see as you or I do. She relies on her hands and her heart to guide her feet."

I think that's my favorite line that I've ever written. I don't even know where it came from, but I'm using that as my motto. Well, in different words, but still. lol. I'm going to stop babbling now. haha.

Later.
Lots of love!
--Patricia

Harley posted December 31, 2009
One of my favorite lines that I have written is in the first chapter of my story "Invasion."

"As the thunder rolled, you could swear the angels were actually bowling strikes up there."

I was having one of those moments where you're so inspired you just have. to. write. that. minute. You know? I saw this topic and thought of that line. . .It's probably one of my best.
Judy posted December 31, 2009
"If I see that you are pointing your arrow at me, do not think I will think twice about what I'm doing before I draw back my bow and shoot."

Patricia posted December 31, 2009
"Amber's sightless eyes stared intently into Vivian's own. It was scary how Amber could do that, know who people were and where they are at, even though she was blind."
In my story Dream of Violet

Eric posted January 1, 2010
This is from a story I'm currently drafting out. This only makes sense if you know that the characters are currently studying at bracelet in the shape of a snake and trying to figure out what it means.
I personally found it exceedingly funny.

"Guys, come over here! I've just made an amazing discovery!"
"What is it Gwin?"
"It wiggles!"

Brittany posted January 1, 2010
Hehe, I like it eric!

Judy posted January 1, 2010
@Eric
Hilarious! Love it!

Here is a part from "Just Living Life" in the chapter "Fast to Fight"
"I'm quick.
You won't see it coming.
I give no warnings.
I won't bark before I bite."

I thought it was nice. :-)

Nancy posted January 1, 2010
(Michael is from a place of swords and arrows, horseback riding and sorcery, but he's come into the 1990s to attend High School to find his ordained bride)

"... today had been horrible. First he had failed a history exame and then he'd done poorly
in English. Apparently he was supposed to write in modern English, not Shakespearian; so it was a hard habit to break. Then there was Gym class; they expected you to know stuff about the sports you were playing?"

Not the line I've been looking for, but I think I might have to open up boxes to find what I'm really looking for *sigh*. I just liked the whole idea of someone being able to write in Shakespearian English naturally.

:} Nancy

Eric

PRAISE posted January 2, 2010
Ha ha, writing in Shakespearian English, lol. This sounds funny XD

Holly

posted January 2, 2010
Favourite quote by me? Probably this, from the newest chapter of oblivious

"Turn down the curtains and shut your voice." He groaned, "Then maybe I'll get up."

<3 hilarious hungoverness =]

happy new decade people =]

xx

Eric

posted January 2, 2010
Ohohoh, here's one from a story I've just written! Me thinks you'll like...

Setting: A city is under siege and a lord has just got into a very heated argument and insult-match with an enemy of his. They're trying to decide who it will be that goes out to attack the enemy first. The only problem is that this is gonna be a suicide mission... much to his commander's dismay.

Lord: "IF THIS CITY IS TAKEN IT WILL BE OVER MY COLD DEAD CORPSE!"

Champion: Correction. Over MY cold dead corpse. You're not the one fighting a horde of angry barbarians.
Nancy posted January 2, 2010
I think you need slightly more context there Eric, so that people know it's the Lord that talkes about the corpse and his Champion who's grumbling the second part.

{:} Nancy

Eric posted January 2, 2010
Hokay, thanks for pointers there!

I fix imminently ... XD

Eric posted January 2, 2010
There we goes. =)

Brittany posted January 2, 2010
I'VE FINALLY FOUND ONE!! :)

I sit here, in a panic, worried that tonight may be my last night, this might be my last breath. We never really know when life will end. I just hope, I'll get to see you again. Then a noise breaks the almost silence. I jump up.

The phone is ringing.

IT's from a story I'm writing "Paranoid

Nancy posted January 3, 2010
Actually my favorite quote comes not from a story but from playing pretend long ago.

"Time to turn off the sun and turn on the candle."

Sun = ceiling light
Candle = reading light on nightstand

Yeah, I've just always loved playing in the past. Someday I'll probably start going to Reenactments with my mother.

{:} Nancy
(P.S. good fix Eric)
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