Annoying Orange: A YouTube Success Story?

As Burgess and Green note in *YouTube: Online Video and Participatory Culture*, YouTube is simultaneously "a high volume website, a broadcast platform, a media archive, and a social network. (5) Burgess and Green's book attempts to capture the nature of YouTube as a media system, particularly one that they argue is an important site for the participatory practices that shape Web 2.0 in the contemporary media landscape. Since 2004, Web 2.0 has described practices that form the participatory web where users contribute but do not control content, and increasingly, where some participants are financially rewarded while others provide content for free. YouTube, a prime example of Web 2.0, was founded in 2005 as "a service aiming to remove the technical barriers to the widespread sharing of video online." (Burgess and Green, 1) By summer of 2006, 100 million clips were viewed daily, with an additional 65,000 new videos uploaded every 24 hours. (USA Today) According to Nielson NetRatings, the website averaged around 20 million

visitors per month, where around 44% were female, 56% male, and the 12-to-17 year old group was dominant. YouTube quickly became part of one of the world's largest global media companies: Google bought it for 1.65 billion dollars in 2006, and since 2008 it has consistently been in the top ten visited sites globally.

One of the central issues around YouTube, as Burgess and Green note, is its "double function as both a "top down" platform for the distribution of popular culture and a "bottom-up" platform for vernacular creativity." (6) Users are encouraged to "Broadcast Yourself," but at the same time the purpose of YouTube is to generate profit, largely from advertising revenue. According to Christian Fuchs, writing in *Internet and Society*, YouTube is an example of a business model that is based on combining the gift, which is free, with the commodity, which is profitable. (181) YouTube provides free access to its users, so that as the number of users grows, it becomes more profitable because it can increase advertising rates, which then attracts more advertisers. From 2006 to the present, advertising has increasingly dominated YouTube, and the

distinction between “amateurs” who post homemade videos and “professional” works designed to make a profit has become increasingly blurred.

In this essay, I will examine the culture of YouTube at the nexus of the professional and the amateur. In particular, I will use the web series Annoying Orange as a case study to explore the way that everyday user-generated content becomes professionalized on YouTube. In so doing, I hope to show how the bottom-up participatory culture of YouTube serves as a support for the top-down culture of commercial media systems. Annoying Orange is an animated fruit who stars in a digital series of comedic shorts whose first “episode” appeared on YouTube in 2009. A self-employed filmmaker, Dane Boedigheimer (known on YouTube as Danebo), created the series. Annoying Orange, like several of Boedigheimer’s earlier YouTube videos (i.e. Screaming Eggs and Marshallow Murders) was meant to direct traffic to Boedigheimer’s website, Gagfilms, which he had created with three friends to offer video production services. (Currently, the Gagfilms

website also offers “A Sure Thing,” a production and promotion service that guarantees 20, 000 views on YouTube.) Like most YouTube content, each episode of Annoying Orange is no more than a few minutes long, and features an orange who sits on a kitchen counter and makes sophomoric jokes directed at the different fruits, vegetables, and other foodstuffs that he encounters. Annoying Orange’s source of verbal humor is what is typically thought of as children’s humor: it comes from puns or a play on a character’s name or appearance, such as “Hey Apple, you look fruity,” calling a pumpkin “plumpkin,”or making repetitive, annoying sounds such as burping, gurgling, or silly noises with his tongue. Annoying Orange heckles and cackles in a shrill voice Boedigheimer’s own voice, sped up), until finally the foodstuffs who are the object of his “annoying” behavior meet a gruesome end.

The images combine photorealism with special effects in order to anthropomorphize the fruit. Alice Crawford, in “The Digital Turn,” writes that “realism,” or even “hyperrealism,” has become the dominant aesthetic of computer-generated imagery. Advances in digital

technologies have democratized the process of producing and distributing animated images, so that the production of highly polished, visually imaginative animated works that conform to a realistic aesthetic have become within reach of many. (115-116) Boedigheimer's work re-invigorates the syncho-vox technique best known from the Clutch Cargo cartoon series (also used on Conan O'Brien): To animate the characters, Boedigheimer superimposes the eyes (more specifically one eye is duplicated) and the mouth of the actors playing each character onto the fruit. Boedigheimer himself plays Annoying Orange, while he uses the eyes and mouth of his friends for the other fruit, creating an eerily photorealistic effect. While the technique looked—and was--extremely cheap to produce in the days of Clutch Cargo, Boedigheimer uses Aftereffects for a far slicker and more "realistic" product that, while time-consuming to shoot, is inexpensive to produce. More recently, the videos have become more complex, with spoofs of popular culture icons in videos such as such as Lady Pasta, Annoying Orange 'Saw,' Annoying Orange Super Mario (which places Annoying Orange in a video game),

and Annoying Orange Gets Autotuned.

In 2010, after Annoying Orange received 11 million views over a six month period, Boedigheimer made a dedicated Annoying Orange YouTube channel called realannoyingorange. It is currently the 9th most subscribed channel on YouTube, and the 31st most viewed of all time, with more than 565 million YouTube views. Annoying Orange also has a half million followers on Facebook. While initially merely a YouTube participant, Boedigheimer has become a YouTube entrepreneur. He has become a YouTube Star who has learned to use YouTube as a revenue-generating source. As such, he maintains the origin myth often ascribed to YouTube success stories. According to Boedigheimer, who now also has a series of YouTube videos called "Danebo Exposed," his success was not planned. He claims that he initially only intended to make and upload one Annoying Orange video, but because of the overwhelming response he went on to produce more, and then eventually to make a channel (there are currently 78 videos). According to Nick Salvato, despite the fact that YouTube—and its users—privilege the professional, the

presentation of amateur status and the insistence that popularity "just happens" is part of the way YouTube masks this ideological work. He writes:

> . . . the users whom YouTube invites to "broadcast [themselves]" regularly and consistently affirm the professional, produced and defined in tandem with and at the ultimate expense of the amateur; and the potent and credible alibi of democratization is precisely what allows such an affirmation. One index of this phenomenon is the extent to which performers with commercial ambitions—and, at times, corporate sponsorship—will use the cachet of the "homegrown" and the "grassroots," predicated on their capacity to confer authenticity, to advance their budding careers. (69)

Youtube regularly seeks to professionalize user content, both with conferences that provide tips on how to become a Youtube Star, and with its YouTube Partnership program. Soon after Google bought YouTube, YouTube invited the most popular YouTube participants to become "partners." In exchange for allowing advertisements that precede each

view of an Annoying Orange episode, partners such as Boedigheimer receive a payment. While YouTube does not reveal specific advertising revenue, YouTube says that content creators get more than half, and many make thousands of dollars a month through advertising. (Fowler) However, the YouTube advertising model is still imperfect: advertisers on videos such as Annoying Orange are placed by algorithm rather than targeted to its demographic.

According to TubeMogul, Boedigheimer was the second highest independent YouTube earner in 2009-10, with an income of $288,000. (BBC News) (It is unclear whether this figure takes into account other revenue sources such as merchandise sales, speaker's fees, or sponsorship deals.) It is worth considering how Annoying Orange shifted from one of the many millions of videos uploaded to YouTube every day to a bankable commodity. Currently, according to Boedigheimer's manager, "When Dane puts up a [YouTube] show on Friday, by Monday it has a million and a half views. Any cable network would take those numbers." (Fowler) While very few studies of YouTube to date have done

specific analysis of videos to account for their popularity, it is instructive to look more closely at Annoying Orange. Annoying Orange fits into what is perhaps the most popular YouTube category, comedy, and one that is already established on YouTube. As Burgess and Green note, the most popular categories on YouTube are self-perpetuating rather than random, so that radically innovative content that does not fit into a "category" will likely not become popular. They write in regard to YouTube categories, " They are not representations of reality, but technologies of re-presentation. Because they communicate to the audience what counts as popular on YouTube, these metrics also take an active role in creating the reality of what's popular on YouTube: they are not only descriptive; they are performative. (41) Along these lines, the wikihow "How to Get Famous on YouTube" offers the following advice:

> "Brainstorm what your videos are going to be. Often check the most viewed videos and most subscribed list, and keep a lookout for new YouTubers on the latter list. Looking at the top subscribe list will

> give you a good perspective on who your audience is and what kind of videos people like."

Burgess and Green also note that while the most subscribed YouTube channels cover a range of genres, YouTube stars whose brands were developed within YouTube's social network dominate this category. (60) The cross promotions practiced by Danebo and other YouTube Stars help to perpetuate this rather incestuous relationship. Annoying Orange illustrates the way that YouTube "popularity" is a self-perpetuating process, with the most well known YouTubers referencing one another through their videos. For example, Boedigheimer appeared as Orange in Lucas Cruikshank's web series "Fred," and Cruikshank returned the favor the next day by appearing in "Annoying Orange vs. Fred!!!" Evan Ferrante from take 180.com appeared in "Close Encounters of the Annoying Kinds," one day after Annoying Orange appeared in Ferrante's video "Not Tom Cruise." Moreover, three of the band Weezer's members appeared as objects on a party platter in the episode "Wazzup 3: Bonsai Tree"; the episode was both a spoof of the popular "Whassup"

Budweiser commercials and part of Weezer's promotion of their album Hurley. And actor James Caan became the first well known actor to appear on the series in the episode called "Jalapeno," most probably as a way to bring exposure to his website that promotes independent film, Openfilm.com. (Tubefilter, December 18, 2010)

Annoying Orange is, like many of the most popular YouTube videos mentioned by Burgess and Green, about experimentation with the digital form, and an indicator of "a logic of cultural value centered for the most part around novelty and humor." (53) According to Tubemogul, Annoying Orange appeals to a demographic of 13-24 year olds, which also corresponds to the dominant YouTube demographic. Like much YouTube humor, it does the cultural work of mischief, which John Hartley describes as "no more than experimental engagement with peer groups and places" and is what he suggests young people today turn to in their leisure time. (130) Annoying Orange "makes mischief" by using its anthropomorphic animation of inanimate objects to both repeat the familiar and evoke the uncanny. It updates and gives new cultural value

to the once familiar syncho-vox technique, and the Annoying Orange character evokes the gleeful mayhem of the classic cartoons of the thirties. According to Boedigheimer, "Watching people get annoyed by something/someone is funny . . ."Look at cartoon characters in the past – Bugs Bunny, Woody Woodpecker, Pepe Le Pew, etc…a lot of their humor came from being annoying. It's a fun proven device to play with." (Tubefilter News)

There is something both familiar and eerie about the animation of the inanimate, so that the photorealistic fruit with the human eyes and mouth produces a sense of the uncanny. This feeling is exaggerated at the end of every episode when Orange typically warns the fruit they are about to be destroyed, most often yelling Knife!" as Boedigheimer's hand enters the frame and slices the fruit. A giant castrating knife or churning blender or pot of boiling water eviscerates the anthropomorphized food, so that an ordinary everyday action, slicing vegetables or boiling pasta, becomes imbued with cruelty. Like the somewhat sadistic cartoons of the thirties, Annoying Orange evokes the pleasure of chaos and disruption as

it simultaneously evokes fear and abjection. The definition of the uncanny that Freud offers can be extrapolated to Annoying Orange: Those pale youths are unheimlech [uncanny] and are brewing heaven knows what mischief. (224) Many adult viewers have strong negative responses, as judged by the comments that follow videos and others that appear in print. For example, Ben Huh, founder of the Cheezburg Network, states. "Seeing one of these is almost like watching a car wreck. The awfulness is what brings the enjoyment." In another case, writer Ned Hepburn said that of all the strange videos he has watched, this was one of the few where he had a physically bad reaction. "It was horrible," he said. (quoted in Fowler).

But other comments on YouTube and elsewhere reveal that while some viewers find Annoying Orange distasteful, others are deeply engaged. There are a plethora of video responses and imitations of Annoying Orange videos, and the website encourages viewer involvement, with questions, contests, and links to Facebook and Twitter. There are more than 8 million "likes" on Facebook. The level of viewer engagement

became apparent recently when in September 2010, Boedigheimer ran a photo submission contest on the Annoying Orange Facebook page. In just over 6 hours there were 25,000 submissions, after which Facebook lost its capacity hold any more photos on the page. It is because of this high level of viewer involvement that corporations make deals with YouTube Stars to pitch their products. According to Caroline Giegrich, director of innovation at Initiative, which was one of the first agencies to run a successful YouTube stars campaign, "What these YouTubers have proven is that they have engaged viewers—they comment, they talk on the YouTuber's facebook page, on Twitter. The brands want millions of views, but they also want engaged viewers. If they're engaged with the stars, clearly they are engaged with the brand—it means someone is not just seeing an ad and forgetting about it." (Slutsky) While Boedigheimer does not yet overtly pitch products in the Annoying Orange videos, he has collaborated with Nokia to promote its Ovi chat phone feature. First the Annoying Orange character appeared on the Nokia YouTube channel in December to offer a holiday greeting, and then became a Chatbot installed

on the phone where users try to outchat the Annoying Orange, with rewards of badges and points. Annoying Orange has also expanded beyond YouTube in other ways. The Collective, an online entertainment management an content company, partnered with Thruster, the games division of Bottle Rocket Apps, to bring an interactive version of Annoying Orange to the iphone and ipad. Kitchen Carnage, a version of the classic paper toss game, is currently the 8th best selling game in the itunes store. As Boedigheimer wrote on his Danebo facebook page, "It's been 3 days and already people have spent more than three years playing this game."

Boedigheimer is, in fact, someone who is adept at self-promotion who has found a way to use Annoying Orange to expand both laterally across YouTube and to jump across media platforms. He now charges a fee for speaking engagements, and there are a range of annoying orange products to purchase, from tee-shirts to stickers, wallpaper and ringtones, to mp3s and podcasts on itunes. Along with his brother, Boedigheimer has opened Superboebros, a gaming channel on YouTube, has a second

youtube channel, a series of web videos called Danebo Exposed, a vlog, a blog, a Danebo website, the Gagfilms website, a spinoff series Liam the Leprechun, and the Annoying Orange website. Moreover, in April, The Collective announced that they had teamed with Boedigheimer to produce six episodes of The Annoying Orange as a tv series. Although the YouTube series Fred was made into a movie that aired on Nickelodeon, this is the first YouTube series to be produced for television. The television project has attracted well known Hollywood names: Malcolm McDowell will star as the voice of Annoying Orange, it will be written by Tom Sheppard, an Emmy award winning writer for Pinky and the Brain, and it will be executive produced by Conrad Vernon, who was a co-director on Monsters and Aliens and Shrek 2. In an interview on Tubefilter (April 15, 2011), Boedigheimer was asked what made Annoying Orange more attractive to television executives: the 7.8 million Facebook fans or the 1.7 million Youtube subscribers. His response pointed to the interrelation of different Web 2.0 platforms: "I think both are extremely valuable and really, the success of Orange has been built

with both. With the YouTube subscribers, you are getting a base of guaranteed viewers that are notified of your new videos. With Facebook, you have the ability to not only tell other people who may not be YouTube subscribers about your new videos, you have the ability to direct people to a video multiple times. I know that's not really picking one or the other, but I think what makes the brand attractive is the power of both networks working in tandem." The establishment of Annoying Orange as a popular culture phenomenon is further illustrated by a recent advertisement for Nabisco Cheez-Its that appears to be based on the Annoying Orange character.

Is Annoying Orange an anomaly, and is Boedigheimer merely a YouTube lottery winner, or is this the future of YouTube? Are the "success" stories of web series such as Annoying Orange merely ways to encourage participants to provide free content for YouTube, with those that do manage to attract significant numbers of views simply providing fodder to attract advertising? Is YouTube, in its early days celebrated as a site for participatory culture, just another space that reproduces relations

of capital and distinguishes between “the haves” --those who profit, and the “have-nots”--those who “participate” by providing free labor that is represented as play. Boedigheimer began posting videos as an ordinary user, albeit a film school graduate who had some animation skills, and he was not compensated for his work. He—and his Gagfilms partners—have now become “professionals” who form part of the commercialized media system. Their free labor has become commodified, and while on the individual level it provides them with value as internet entrepreneurs, overall Annoying Orange is validating the top-down structure of traditional media systems, where success is defined by star status, the generation of capital, and the ability to cross over to mainstream media platforms.

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