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The Times, They Are Remixin’: Indaba Music, Creative Commons, and the Digital Collaboration Frontier

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So, here’s the deal. The rules of this game are actually up to you. This is not a world made up of passive consumers anymore. That era is over. This world is made up of collaborators. We can create and share. We can change laws and act.

Brett Gaylor, *RiP! A Remix Manifesto*

In this year’s “Greetings from the Program Chair,” Gwendolyn Pough quoted Brett Gaylor to open the 61st Annual Conference on College Composition and Communication (CCCC), the apt theme of which is “The Remix: Revisit, Rethink, Revise, Renew.” Pough’s choice is a brilliantly salient one: this single quote represents the promise of the new millennium and the project that lies ahead, as we navigate these first few months of the new decade. And the theme of this year’s conference urges us to act -- to revisit, rethink, revise, and renew our understanding of “remix” — so that’s where this update will begin (and end).

Revisit

In 2001, Creative Commons (CC) was founded with support from Duke University Law School’s Center for the Public Domain and with the solid leadership of its founding board members. One of its most outspoken founders is Lawrence Lessig, Professor of Law at Stanford University, founder of its Center for Internet and Society, and commons defender extraordinaire. Creative Commons is a nonprofit organization that “works to increase the amount of creativity (cultural, educational, and scientific) in ‘the commons’ – the body of work that is available to the public for free and legal sharing, use, repurposing, and remixing.” CC does its vital work, in part by offering legal alternatives to the current “one-size fits all” copyright. Content creators, from individuals to corporations, can elect a “some rights reserved” copyright (allowing for a wider range of content use, while still protecting copyright) or a “no rights reserved” copyright (which allows content to be used freely, without the constraints of any copyright protection). Since its inception, approximately 130 million works have been licensed and ported to over 50 international jurisdictions. In fact, Brett Gaylor licensed his collaborative website “Open Source Cinema” under a CC license; this website was then created to produce the documentary film *RiP! A Remix Manifesto*. The film was created over a period of six years using the work of hundreds of people who contributed to the Open Source Cinema website. This collaboration resulted in what Gaylor would call “the world’s first open source documentary,” a documentary that would eventually inspire Gwendolyn Pough to quote from it to open this year’s CCCCs. And a documentary which would feature an appearance by Lawrence Lessig, one of the founders of Creative Commons, under which license the Open Source Cinema website was made a reality.

Rethink

Though Lessig stepped down as CEO of CC in 2008, he has remained a forthright voice for copyright reform. His most recent book, *Remix: Making Art and Commerce Thrive in the Hybrid Economy* (2008) will, like his other books, be CC licensed and made available to the public for free. But, unlike his launching of the other books, Lessig was invited to be a guest on the January 8, 2009 Colbert Report and (re)mix it up with the feisty Colbert who, appropriately, called the whole remix idea “artistic socialism.” During the approximately six minute debate, Colbert stopped to explicitly issue a challenge to the audience:

Nobody should take my work and do anything with it that is not approved! Never ever never ever take anything of mine and remix it! For instance, I will be very angry and possibly litigious if anyone out there takes this interview right here and remixes it with some great dance beat. And it starts showing up in clubs across America.
What followed, of course, was brilliantly (and hilariously) inevitable.

**Revise**

On his January 21, 2009 show, Colbert issued a new warning: to those “DJ Jazzy Jerks” who, within 24 hours of the Lessig appearance, had flooded the internet with remixes of the interview “appallingly set to the very dance beats [Colbert] had clearly prohibited.” He then offered his own retort in the form of a music video (that remixed himself) and followed it up with another challenge: “Let me be very clear. Stephen does not -- *not* -- want you to take his interview with Lawrence Lessig and remix it with a pumping k-hole groove.”

But the remixing was already in full force. After the Lessig interview, the audio from the show was posted in a public session on indabamusic.com, where more than 150 collaborators created over 50 remixes of the show. As was the plan, Colbert’s second challenge did not stay the tide of remixes; the Indaba community persisted until Colbert “was forced to recognize the power of the remixing community.” On February 4, 2009, Indaba co-founder Daniel Zaccagnino was the guest on the Colbert Report. Daniel, and Indaba’s co-founder Matthew Siegel, wrote of the experience in “Commoner Letter #5” (letters from users/supporters of CC): “it was great fun and a wonderful example of how everyone can benefit from being open with their content – from Colbert generating an incredible viral marketing campaign, to Indaba getting exposure, to a few select musicians who had their music played on national TV.” In short, this is a wonderful example of remix. Indaba music’s remix presence also illustrates what Lawrence Lessig means by the term “hybrid economy”: an economy where “commercial entities leverage value from sharing economies.” “That future.” Lessig asserts, “will benefit both commerce and community. If the lawyers could get out of the way, it could be a future we could celebrate.”

**Renew**

Indaba is a Zulu word that celebrates “the spirit of collaboration and community…a gathering or forum for sharing ideas” concepts that drive the mission of Indaba Music. The co-founders, Dan and Matt, sowed the seeds for this project in college, starting it first as a nonprofit student record label. Currently, Indaba Music is a community of over 350,000 musicians from 185 countries who create music together in online recording sessions, using Indaba’s free Java-based mixing platform or their own audio software. These online collaborative projects – from the individual tracks to the final song they create – can be licensed under a CC license so that musicians can specify control over the use of their tracks in the larger collaborative work. The site regularly runs collaborative contests which allow the Indaba community to “remix and re-imagine” the work of current artists. Last year, Indaba music members competed to remix the entire Marcy Playground album *Leaving Wonderland…In a Fit of Rage*. “All of the remixes are CC licensed and winners will actually get royalties on the sale of a remix CD that will hit the airwaves early next year.”

And Wired.com did a story on an even more high profile Indaba remix contest: one “where anyone, even beginners, [got to] remix tracks by a wide-selection of high profile artists…heavy-hitters like Kanye West, David Byrne, Chuck D, RZA, The Cool Kids, Ol’Dirty Bastard, Tom Waits, DJ AM, KRS-One, Ghostface Killah, Method Man, Lykke Si, Santogold, George Clinton, Scarface, and M.I.A. Working so closely with all of these artists’ voices and beats would normally get you sued. Instead you could net a thousand dollars and a new career as a remix artist.”

**The Remix (a Reprise)**

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Brett Gaylor, *RiP! A Remix Manifesto*

We may not be the next Lawrence Lessig, Brett Gaylor, Dan Zaccagnino, or Matt Siegel. We may never be invited to appear on the Colbert Report. We may never be the next DJ Girl Talk. But we can create and share. We can change laws and act. And we can participate in creating the rules that allow these kinds of exciting remixes to happen.

Get Involved with CCCC-IP
Submit by Traci Zimmerman – Associate Professor – The School of Writing, Rhetoric, and Technical Communication
James Madison University
Junior Chair; CCC-IP Caucus

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1. http://creativecommons.org/
7. http://creativecommons.org/weblog/entry/19365
10. http://creativecommons.org/weblog/entry/19365

Intellectual Property Reports Main Page

[http://www.ncte.org/cccc/committees/ip/ipreports]