

LABORERS OF LOVE/LOL: BEHIND THE SCENES

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In the past 10 years the porn industry has experienced its most dramatic shifts in profit, production and product due to the advent of Web 2.0 and mobile devices. “Laborers of Love/LOL” examines these changes through the creation of an adult entertainment website that outsources customers’ fantasies to anonymous online workers.

Be it a robotic dildo or an early adopter to Video On Demand, the porn industry has always been a leader in the development and incorporation of new technologies into the production and distribution of its products. Yet in the past 10 years the porn industry has experienced its most dramatic shifts in profit, production and product due to the advent of Web 2.0 and mobile devices. “Laborers of Love/LOL”, an online artwork I co-developed with artists Jeffrey Crouse and Micheal Schieben examines these changes through the creation of an adult entertainment website. The website outsources customers’ fantasies to a pool of anonymous online workers seeking temporary jobs through Mechanical Turk, a crowdsourcing job engine created by Amazon. Com. The final product is a short recombinant video, a mashup, where 1970’s experimental cinema meets canned Photoshop filters, and ultimately reflects on how desire and pleasure are represented, fragmented and abstracted through the consumption of online digital media.

1. Profit: The Pirates of Pornzance

Pirates XXX was released on DVD by the leading Adult Film Company, Digital Playground, in 2005, three years after Johnny Depp’s pirate film. Featuring porn star Jesse Jane it was the most expensive pornographic movie ever made with a budget of over \$1 million. It was also one of the first adult videos to be made in High Definition DVD. It won a record-breaking eleven awards, including Best All-Girl Sex Scene, at the AVN Awards—the porn world’s Oscars.

Yet five years later at the 2010 Adult Entertainment Expo in Las Vegas, the biggest annual gathering of the adult film industry, the event was shrunk down from two floors to one with so many less fans, foot traffic, and exhibitors you could lie down on the floor and take a quick catnap. Even the AVN Awards had been moved from the city arena to the few-thousand-seats theater at the Palms.

So what has happened to the \$13 billion dollar porn industry? Pirates! Similar to what the music industry experienced in early 2000, the introduction of digital formats in conjunction with the weak economy has led to severe financial pains. The news site CNBC reported DVD sales down as much as 50% in 2009.

In reference to illegal downloading and “Tube” sites like YouPorn, Steve Javors, editor in chief of XBIZ, a major porn industry trade mag, exclaimed “How can you compete with free?”¹

Porn is now also competing with online games like World of Warcraft. An anonymous porn webmaster stated “It is all entertainment that you are getting involved in ... [video] games are competition for porn. Fans jerk off to porn and are done, but you can keep playing a game.”²

1. Production: We Are All Sex Workers

Last year in an article in the Daily Beast, Pete Housley, developer of Porn Star Tweet, a service that verifies and aggregates porn stars on Twitter, said “People used to be ashamed to say their girlfriends did porn. That is gone. Anyone can afford a Web site now.”³ Whether it’s the girl or boy next door making their own porn site or celebrities making porn flicks such as the infamous Paris Hilton, the gap between mainstream media and adult entertaining is shrinking.

User-generated porn, or Porn 2.0 as it is called, is being enabled by web sites like Xtube, Pornhub or YouPorn—free pornographic video sharing sites similar in format to YouTube. The New York Times calls sites such as YouPorn “a good role model for the sexually naïve” since many of the homemade videos depict amateur couples having ordinary sex in contrast to the unreal scenarios of commercial porn.⁴ Regina Lynn, sex columnist for Wired magazine, says “Despite social and professional stigmas, a lot of people are putting themselves on the internet. It fits into this era of people expressing themselves.”⁵

An example is Antoinette, a 25 yr old college educated interior designer from Baltimore, MD. A few times a month she and her boyfriend make “amateur” pornographic movies in their apartment under the name “Sexy Secret”. Antoinette claims she does not want to be a porn star and considers herself “a pretty normal woman” saying “... I'm nice looking, sure, but otherwise I'm pretty average.”⁶ Yet, this “couple next door” makes films with explicit displays of hardcore intercourse that would garner a XXX billing—and their 20 minutes of “work” in the bedroom earns them an extra \$500 to \$600 a month.⁷

In addition, the use of social media such as Twitter and Facebook has had a humanizing effect further mainstreaming the industry by enabling porn makers to directly engage with their audience.

But making videos and conversing with fans through social media is just one aspect of the shifting role of the sex worker. One can remain anonymous and still contribute their labor. Online temporary job agencies such as Mechanical Turk, enable anyone to make porn. By responding to HITS, what Mechanical

Turk calls “Human Intelligence Tasks”, an online “worker” can make anywhere from a few cents to several dollars for finding specific images or videos through online searches. The faster you work, i.e. the more HITS you respond to, leads to higher earnings. This anonymous, outsourced distributed global labor is the mode of production “Laborers of Love/LOL” uses to create its product.

2. Product: The Medium is the Massage

- Approximately 45% of North Americans and Europeans are viewing media on their mobile devices⁸
- internet users are shown approximately 1.1 trillion advertisements per year with Facebook webpages taking the lead⁹
- on average Americans view 3,000 advertisement per day¹⁰
- Every second approximately 30,000 people are viewing porn¹¹
- The average online porn flick is 5 minutes long¹²
- The average time it takes to reach an orgasm while masturbating is between 2-4 minutes¹³
- average view time on a web page is 33 seconds¹⁴

In Linda Williams renowned anthology “Porn Studies”, a collection of academic essays on pornography as a cultural form published in 2004, writer/curator Franklin Melendez investigates the relationship between technology and sexuality. In examining the phenomena of video and the advent of the VCR as a new format, he explores the relationship of the convulsing body to the convulsing machine. With references to Jean Baudrillard and Frederic Jameson, he explains how the mechanical apparatus used to construct the image becomes as vital to the experience of pleasure as the sexual event itself in what he calls an “eroticization of mediation” or the “image’s commodity texture”.¹⁵ The material conditions such as the techniques and editing strategies used to construct the video (timing, repetition, special effects) as well as the platform, in his case the TV and the VCR are all critical to creating sexual truth in the scene.

Referencing Jonathan Crary’s theory of the carnal density of vision, Melendez states that in watching pornography on the screen we experience two types of pleasure– “the possessing or consuming of the image through a disembodied gaze that operates in conjunction with corporealized vision–the pleasure of pornography’s physical effects on the body”.¹⁶ This relationship of disembodied/embodyed then point to the significance of the viewer’s encounter with historically specific modes of reproduction. Thus the “performers bodies and the television screen start to question priority of content over medium.”¹⁷

If we now fast-forward to the world of Web 2.0 and mobile devices, short format wins hands-down. The byte, b-y-t-e as well as the bite, b-i-t-e as experienced on our slick sexy shrinking machines are what's relevant here. In a global culture oversaturated with information, the viewing experience has shifted. Our sight has been subjugated to the media sphere and we see the world in 33-second intervals or less—the time it takes to scan a web page or watch a TV commercial. Through this hyper fragmentation of our vision, a new cultural form has emerged—the mashup. “Laborers of Love/LOL” utilizes the mashup to provide the ultimate in sexual pleasure and fantasy in the age of digital culture.

A demo of “Laborers of Love/LOL” is available online at: <http://vimeo.com/17837725>

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