Exploring the Character of Participation in Social Media: 
The Case of Google Image Labeler

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ABSTRACT
Social media are transforming interpersonal and social interactions, enabling new forms of engagement and participation. However, we know little about how the specific design qualities of social media affect social interaction in these environments. Considering the diversity of social media today, there is a need to engage with specific cases to discern possible patterns of relationship between designed characteristics of social media and the character of participation in them. To illustrate, this paper draws on a case study of the game, “Google Image Labeler.” The design of the game is studied through a close reading of arguments made by its designers followed by an Internet study of what users and critics say about their interactions with the game. These studies, in conjunction with theories of social interaction by John Dewey and Robert Putnam, provide a foundation for a critical stance toward the quality of participation in this game that informs design theory and practice.

Keywords  
Social Computing, Serious Games, Criticism, Participation, Social Interaction, Interaction Design

INTRODUCTION
Social media take many different forms, including weblogs, wikis, podcasts, Internet forums, and sharing and networking sites like YouTube, Flickr, and Facebook. These environments have recently captured attention from business, academia, and the public. One of the reasons behind the excitement about these products is their social nature – they create environments that transcend the limitations of time and space, enabling individuals and communities to be formed and sustained around shared interests, concerns, or activities. Whether or not the quality of social experience in these environments is worthwhile is generally contested. Utopian themes such as free culture, open access, and democratization of information as well as dystopian themes such as collectivism, addiction, and social isolation appear in discourse about social media (e.g., [12, 14, 16, 18, 19, 25]). These themes point to one of the central questions in the current discussion of social media: do social media enhance or hinder social interaction and in what ways?

Considering the range and diversity of social media today, generalized positions are not productive. Such positions inhibit reflection and imagination about the actual effects of specific products. In contrast, by focusing attention on the design and experiences of specific cases, we can discern patterns of possible relationships between the material characteristics of these products and the qualities of experience around them. Such studies take the discussions of social media beyond sheer optimism or pessimism to engage with them at an experiential and practical level [17].

With this premise, the game Google Image Labeler is examined in this paper [1]. First, the design of the game is studied through the arguments made by its designers. Based on this study, principles that inform the game’s design are identified and the way that these principles shape the form and features of these products are explored. Second, the experiential qualities of the game are studied through an analysis of what players and critics say about the game. Finally, these accounts are considered in connection to the social theories of John Dewey and Robert Putnam who have inquired into the worth of social units and participation. It is argued that while networked technologies can provide some of the material conditions for engagement and community, the character of participation in these environments is shaped by the specifics of their design.

GOOGLE IMAGE LABELER
Designers’ Perspective

Google Image Labeler is a game based on a concept developed by Luis von Ahn at Carnegie Mellon University. The game is an example of a broader concept referred to as “human computation” with the purpose of employing “human processing power” for tasks that computers are unable to perform. For example, people can complete parts of machine processes such as image and speech recognition.
or language analysis that are otherwise difficult or impossible for computers to perform.

One of the biggest challenges of human computation is to find efficient ways of incorporating people in machine processes. Following this idea, von Ahn created a series of games titled Extra Sensory Perception (ESP) that employ gamers to actively improve the web [21, 23]. In one of the games, players are paired randomly and presented with a series of images. Individual players have 90 seconds to enter as many labels as possible for each image, receiving points based on the number of matched labels with their partner. The person with the highest points is considered the winner. To encourage players, the game keeps track of high scores and features "Today's Top Pairs" and "All-time Top Labelers" lists. Google has adopted this idea in the game titled, “Google Image Labeler.”

Noting that in 2003 players collectively spent nine billion hours on Solitaire, von Ahn explains how this time may be harnessed to “make people work for free”: Unlike computer processors, humans require some incentive to become part of a collective computation. Online games are a seductive method for encouraging people to participate in the process. Such games constitute a general mechanism for using brain-power to solve open problems. In fact, designing such a game is much like designing an algorithm—it must be proven correct, its efficiency can be analyzed, a more efficient version can supersede a less efficient one, and so on. Instead of using a silicon processor, these “algorithms” run on a processor consisting of ordinary humans interacting with computers over the Internet [23].

As the above quote indicates, it is the performance of the machine that ultimately drives the design of the game. Players are attended to only to the extent that is necessary to ‘seduce’ them into playing. This is based on the idea that self-interest or the desire to enjoy oneself is the ultimate reason for getting involved in activities.

For this reason, in Google Image Labeler the actual purpose of labeling images is de-emphasized. Instead, the focus is on creating a ‘fun’ environment to maximize the time that people spend with the game. This is also evident in the authors’ comparison of Google Image Labeler with the Open Mind Initiative [2], which relies more heavily on volunteer efforts:

_We don’t expect volunteers to label all images on the Web for us: we expect all images to be labeled because people want to play our game [22]._

Principles of efficiency and pleasure are key in the design decisions for creation of a game-like environment. Fun is used as incentive to secure the efficiency of the machine. Ideas of fun and efficiency similarly inform the form of the game. For example, the fast pace of the game and features such as "Today's Top Pairs" and "All-time Top

Labelers" help create a competitive environment and thus encourage longer play times. The fast pace of the game also ensures that the time with the game is spent in a way that would maximize the number of labels.

Similarly, the ideas of efficiency and pleasure inform the use of a primarily statistical approach for evaluation of the game. The designers consider the game as ‘successful’ if enough human-hours are spent playing it, sidestepping any philosophical discussions of fun [23]. The design approach and its supporting arguments, however, suggest that fun is understood as an irrational derive or momentary sensations of pleasure in context of the game.

In short, the idea at the core of Google Image Labeler is that people are driven by self-interest. So, it is argued that the key to people’s engagement in an activity is to create an environment that is appealing regardless of its ultimate purpose. This idea together with the goal of maximizing efficiency in labeling images drives the design of the game.¹

**Form and Features**

A link to Google Image Labeler is accessible on the image search page of Google. The link points to a plain page with a rather crude design aesthetic in comparison to the minimal and modernist design aesthetic of most other Google products. A collective of factors such as no margins and mixing of left-justified and centered text contribute to this quality. An image of a bird and the “start labeling” link stand out. Lists of “Today’s Top Players”, and “All-time Top Contributors” are also included.

The information available on this page is limited. The purpose is listed with no information about how player’s contributions are affecting the search, or how effective they

¹ While this paper is by no means an attempt to capture the debates about what constitutes pleasure, it is important to note that both modern scientific theories of emotion and various philosophic traditions have challenged the simple picture of pleasure ([16, 18]) These theories do not deny the physiological aspect of emotions, but provide a more complete understanding by pointing to other key constituents such as cognition, the individuals’ expectations and assessment of the situation, or the cultural influences such as norms, beliefs, and ideals among others.
have been. The other information listed on this page includes:

*How does it work?* explains the mechanics of the game including how players are paired with a partner and the scoring mechanism. *Tips,* explains how to play the game to maximize score. *What you need to participate?* describes the purpose of the game.

The game page carries similar aesthetic qualities and includes time remaining for labeling an image, the score, and the number of times the player has skipped an image.

**NOTE ON METHOD**

In order to understand the experiences of people playing the game, a qualitative approach relying on the Internet is presented as the primary source of data. Blog entries that document the experience of playing the game have been surveyed as well as other online resources such as news articles, discussion forums and commentaries. The accounts of players and critics are taken as an indicator of how players make sense of their experiences of the game. Altogether, more than 60 websites (including blogs, discussion forums, news websites and reader comments) were accessed in the period of about five months.

The method that is used to make sense of the data has affinities to grounded theory as envisioned by Glaser and Strauss. It is grounded in the sense that it is concerned with lived experiences which it takes to be the material of study. Also, similar to grounded theory, it starts from immersion in text (such field notes, interviews, etc) looking for patterns that emerge within it. It builds theory based on these descriptions and categories while constantly going back to check them against data [4, 9].

However, this study marks a departure from grounded theory as originally conceived in subtle but important ways. The differences are tightly related to the interpretation of what theory is. In Constructing Grounded Theory, Kathy Charmaz distinguishes two interpretations of theory that are useful in positioning this work. In the first interpretation of theory rooted in the positivist tradition, theories are understood as explanations and predictions. Thus, causes are sought in development of theory and deterministic explanations are favored. In the second interpretation of theory, which is rooted in the phenomenological traditions understanding is sought, recognizing that it is deeply connected to the theorist’s interpretation of the studied phenomena. In this tradition, grounded theory is not considered as a process of finding explanations and predictions but rather concerned with showing patterns and relationships. It assumes emergent and multiple realities and embraces indeterminacy especially in social and cultural phenomena. It also acknowledges subjectivity in theorizing [4].

Following the latter interpretation of theory and in line with theories in ethnography that challenge transparency and representational accuracy [5, 8, 20], this study does not presume a neutral encounter with the subject of study. Rather, the ongoing formation and refinement of theory in the process of the researcher’s encounter with the product, observations and interaction with data is recognized. It is also acknowledged that individual expectations and experiences as well as goals and purposes of study are an inseparable part of this encounter. Consequently, grounded theory has not been used as a recipe but adapted to suit the subject matter and context of this study as well as its practical boundaries.

While it is recognized that the selection and order of narrative reflects the researchers’ encounter and perspective, the actual comments and responses are presented to bring in the audience into the space of discourse. These statements are included, as equally valid voices that help the understanding of what it is like to play the game. Thus, the inclusion of statements and comments is significant for their dialogical capacity as opposed to representational precision.

**EXPERIENCES OF THE GAME**

In what follows, the five major themes that were identified are presented with examples for each theme.

**Fun**

Time spent with the game, as the designers suggest, indicates that people find the game fun or may be a sign of the addictive nature of the game. Statistics are not available for Google Image Labeler; however, both being fun and addictive qualities are cited on the discussion boards and commentaries on the web. Many players say that they have fun playing the game and compete for high scores. For example:

> This approach was quite clever on Google’s part. By turning this into a game and allowing people to accumulate points over time, this repetitive and boring task is turned into a challenging and fun test of your mental skills. As those of you with kids know, this kind of tactic can be quite motivating ("Who can put away more blocks in one minute? Ready, go!").

> Why is this so insanely fun? And I thought I was gonna do some work today.

Sub-themes that appear in this category often have to do with inability to co-ordinate with the playing partner or a lack of trust in what/who they are.

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In this category there are also lengthy discussions about how to win more points or cheat the system in order to co-ordinate with the partner and win. For example:

Some tips to get a lot of points:
- type something and fast
- use general descriptions (I know it’s a Van Gogh painting, but your partner maybe doesn’t know, so use "painting")
- if you don’t know what’s in the image, type the color of the image, objects, shapes
- if a picture depicts people try the obvious: "man", "woman", "people"
- type the short and obvious labels first.

Some barriers to being fun mentioned by the players is the inability to choose play partner, or being matched with players who misspell or type too slowly.

Statistical studies conducted by the game designers on the ESP suggest that people spend long stretches of time with the ESP game. Based on their report a total of 13,630 people played the ESP game, generating 1,271,451 labels for 293,760 different images in a four month period. Over 80% of the people played on more than one occasion and 33 people played more than 1,000 games. The designers note: “We believe these numbers provide evidence that the game is fun: almost 1.3 million labels were collected with only 13,630 players, some of whom spent over 50 hours playing the game! [22]”

A Good Cause

Another group of players seem well aware of the intent of the game. For them, the idea of helping Google label images serves as justification for the time they spend with it. For example, one writes: “I think it’s a lot of fun and at the same time you’re helping Google provide better image results,” a sentiment that is reflected by other players:

I feel like I’m giving a little something back to the world as well while I’m doing it. I may not be helping build a school for underprivileged children somewhere, or rescuing a maltreated mandrill but I am helping surfers all over the world find those much sort after images more efficiently and effectively...  

A bit of fun and it makes Google image search more efficient too.

Among players who at least partially play to help Google with its search results, there is recognition that the structure of the game encourages certain type of labels that are not good descriptions of the images but are likely to win more points thus diminishing the results of their time and effort. As players compete for higher scores, they tend to create labels that are more likely to win points, leading to a general dissatisfaction with the game’s structure and a feeling that it undermines their efforts. For example:

For those trying to play for points, I don't think that's the final purpose. By focusing on the simple descriptions like blue and man and car you can power through many photos with a savvy partner. But how descriptive are these terms? Eventually the system will make these words unavailable. Then we'll see the real creative, concise and accurate descriptions begin. That's what I'm looking forward to. I still find this game really fun, but it'll be a blast when we'll have to put real thought into a description and not just a set of rote naming conventions to gain points. Right now it's like Dance-Dance Revolution for tags. Scores will drop, but the game will get better.

Addictive

The addictive quality of the game persists in the comments of both sets of players mentioned above, those who find it fun and those who play to help Google produce better search results. For example,

I tried it out and found it to be oddly addictive.

I find it a bit addictive, but only good in small doses.

It’s too late! I already tried it! I’m hooked already, it’s really addictive.

There are three key characteristics that contribute to this quality. One is that each round takes only 2 minutes. This short commitment makes it easy to keep playing. Second, players learn quickly that they have a better chance for those trying to play for points, I don’t think that's the final purpose.


of winning if they enter more obvious labels. They also learn that the trick for scoring high is to type as quickly as possible. This means not really thinking about how well the labels match the images. These two characteristics make it easy to lose a sense of time. A final quality that possibly contributes to the addictive quality of the game is that there is no beginning or end. The game is constantly on.

Exploitative

Finally, a series of accounts characterize the experience of playing Google Image Labeler as mechanical and unfulfilling (echoed by more recent academic commentary such as [3]).

Many are offended by the game and view it as an exploitation of people’s time and trust. For example:

This game is about as fun as the game we play at the our household called “Let’s Race.” “Let’s Race” is played like this. You do the dishes, I do the laundry, whoever finishes first is the big winner! On your mark, get set, goooooooooo![...] By the way Google, I’ve got another cool game to pitch you on when you have a second. It’s called the who can sweep out the Google parking lot game the fastest. What you do is have people show up at the Googleplex and give them brooms. They race up and down rows in the parking lot sweeping up. The winner gets their name handle on a little the Google Clean Up the Parking Lot Game homepage.12

They’re pulling a Tom Sawyer fence whitewashing. Make people do your bitchwork, give them points! What do the points do? Nothing13

Creative

While expression and creativity are not the stated goals of the designers, they do appear in interesting ways in players’ responses to the game. Creative responses emerge in such areas as strategies players lay out for winning more points, co-ordinating with partners in the game, or finding whether partners are humans or robots (pre-programmed scripts). For example, one player lays out creative strategies to win more points:

TRICKS. Try to be accurate with plurals, most plurals have higher scores than the singular. If you see four of something try simply typing “4”. When you match on a number the score is high. If you see a sports player’s number on his jersey, type the number. Often the obvious words are in the list of off-limits labels. Remember that points are not awarded for accuracy, so if you see Saturn and that is an off-limit, try Jupiter. Creative misspelling often works, dessert - desert, tattoo - tattoo, [...]. Painting and art are low scoring labels so look for details or colors in the picture and try "frame", "paint", "nude", "church", "religious", or "sketch."14

Another player details the many ways that the game can be hacked. For example, in the following (s)he lays out a creative strategy for coordinating with other players to win more points:

Let’s assume a friend and I want to screw with the system. How would we do it? You might remember the prisoner’s dilemma and the winning strategy? Use a weird keyword as a rendezvous point.

Describe the first image with "entrepreneurialism". If your random partner also uses "entrepreneurialism" then you know you've hooked up. Just continue to guess "entrepreneurialism" on each image presented and you will keep getting points. In fact, keep "entrepreneurialism" in your clipboard and just paste it in as fast as possible. You could easily label 50 images in a round for a score of 5,000 points.15

As these examples indicate, the fact that the game does not acknowledge or support agency by the players does not eliminate the expression of agency on their part. For the most part, however, these expressions manifest in opposition to core purpose of the game that is labeling images (e.g., to coordinate with their play partner to score higher points or to cheat the game).

DISCUSSION

Configuring the Users

The idea at the core of the design of Google Image Labeler is that people are driven by self-interest. As a result, it is argued that the key to people’s engagement in an activity is to create an environment that is appealing regardless of its ultimate purpose. It is this idea that justifies the creation of a game-like environment and guides the details of game’s form and structure. As a result, most of the discussion by designers is aimed at prediction and modeling of users’ behavior in order to control it toward desired outcomes. In this manner, Google Image Labeler is an example of products that aim to “configure the user,” that is to “define, enable, and constrain,” by a precise script that controls every aspect of their behavior [11, 24].

The emphasis on modeling and control of user behavior is also reflected in the changes in the game mechanics since the game’s launch. For example, in the early versions of the game, all labels scored 100 points. As both designers and players describe, a direct result of this scoring system was that players entered more general terms that had a higher probability of being a match with a partner’s guess. Thus, this was replaced with a more elaborate scoring system in subsequent versions to encourage more specific labels. Similarly, the body of technical literature that follows the


design and implementation of Google Image Labeler is generally focused on better modeling of players’ behavior that ensure the desired outcomes (e.g., [10, 15]).

Google Image Labeler aims to control players’ behavior through a system that limits most interactions other than the ones deemed desirable. However, in its emphasis on modeling and controlling players’ behavior, it fails to recognize their agency and creativity. This leads to a general mistrust manifest in the theme of exploitation. It also undermines the game’s purpose as players come up with creative strategies to subvert the system.

Community as a Lens for Criticism

Before proceeding to this section, it is important to note that Google Image Labeler is not intended as an online community. Nonetheless, the crowdsourced nature of the game, the participation of individuals for philanthropic purpose, and concerns over exploitation evoke themes that are familiar within organizational structures that create a variety of relational forms among their members. Moreover, the central purpose of the game is to create a hub for collecting human labor in an efficient and productive way, similar to a factory that brings people together around a shared activity. So, the fact that community is not the core purpose of the game does not preclude issues regarding community to surface in connection with the game.¹⁶

To examine the experience of community in the context of Google Image Labeler, this paper turns to John Dewey’s seminal 1916 book, Democracy and Education, which includes an in-depth inquiry into the concepts of community and sociality. Dewey’s treatment of community is relevant and constructive to the discussions of social media for its pluralistic stance that counters idealist and transcendental notions, while avoiding an instrumental view focused merely on individual interests and benefits. Dewey’s pragmatic view of community is grounded in concrete practices, experiences, and situations of everyday, emphasizing the fact and value of multiple, inclusive, and organic modes of social life in a democratic society.

As such, Democracy and Education goes beyond abstract discussions of “social” as a singular and normative term and articulates the qualities for examination of the many modes of associated living. These qualities are also productive for understanding the experience of community in online environments such as Google Image Labeler.

More specifically, Dewey notes that society consists of many groups and modes of community life. These groups may be tied together by blood, language, religion, or in the aims they pursue such as scientific, industrial, or political purposes. Each of these groups may have only some of the praiseworthy characteristics associated with social life. For example, a band of thieves share a common interest, gangs are marked by intense loyalty to their own code, or a family might be a mode of amity and mutual aim within but of exclusiveness and suspicion to those without [6].

Following the recognition of the variety of modes of community life, the next question is “how might we measure the worth of different forms of community life?” To answer this question, Dewey takes a criminal band as example. The members of such a band have a shared interest or goal that brings them together. Yet, this shared interest is limited and limiting. It is limited because it is the only interest that binds them. It is limiting because it restricts the interactions of the group with others by its nature. It is easy to see how an individual belonging to this band might want to restrict his interactions with other groups or individuals out of fear. This mode of association therefore leads to isolation of its members. Dewey contrasts this example with another mode of social life like the family. The members of a healthy family share material, intellectual, and aesthetic interests in which they all participate. Family life is also open to interaction with other groups such as other families, school, or business and political organizations. It contributes to and benefits from this interaction. Finally, the progress of one member has worth for the experience of other members and vise versa. Following these examples, Dewey proposes two questions for assessment of the worth of different forms of social life:

1: How numerous and varied are the interest which are consciously shared?

2: How full and free is the interplay with other forms of association?

These criteria resonate with the notion of social capital that is central to the arguments of political scientist Robert Putnam and invoked by a growing number of sociologists, economists, and organizational theorists. Putnam defines social capital in the following manner [13]:

Whereas physical capital refers to physical objects and human capital refers to the properties of individuals, social capital refers to connections among individuals – social networks and the norms of reciprocity and trustworthiness that arise from them. In that sense social capital is closely related to what some have called “civic virtue.” The difference is that “social capital” calls attention to the fact that civic virtue is most powerful when embedded in a sense network of reciprocal social relations. A society of many virtuous but isolated individuals is not necessarily rich in social capital.

He goes on to identify two kinds of social capital, “bonding” capital, which refers to the value of connectedness among more homogenous groups such as members of a religious or political community and “bridging” capital, which refers to the connectedness

¹⁶ The importance of the human element and community has been increasingly recognized since Fredrick Taylor’s scientific management experiments more than 100 years ago. Organizational studies has been concerned with the relationship of structures, resources, and processes that render work environments productive, meaningful, and sustainable as communities. See, [12, 16]
among diverse groups such as those of varying religions or political views who come together in a shared activity. These two kinds of capital correspond to the criteria set by Dewey for assessment of sociality. More specifically, bonding capital corresponds to Dewey’s first question in its emphasis on the value of the ties among members of a social unit (e.g., a family, members of a church), and bridging capital corresponds to the second question in its recognition of the value of interaction among groups with a diversity of interests or values. These criteria are useful for examining the characteristics that contribute to the experience of community in Google Image Labeler.

The first question is “How numerous and varied are the interests that are consciously shared?” It is clear that what brings the players together around Google Image Labeler is very limited. Some play because they find the game fun or like to score high and beat other players. Some play because they are bored or to waste time. Others play in their determination to help Google label images on the web. While this is a rather limited set, it is possible to imagine how Google Image Labeler could be a beginning for sociality if players could interact and communicate. The game’s environment, however, limits the very basis of sociality, communication. The image labels are the only means of communication, leaving little chance for players to interact in the game.

This characteristic is also important for answering the second question about whether a social mode of life is worthwhile. As a two-player game that requires speed and concentration to score points, it is easy to see how Google Image Labeler may cut off players from the social world around them. As mentioned earlier, many players describe the addictive qualities of the game that also indicates this capacity. In his talk at Google titled: “Human Computation” von Ahn remarks that some players spend more than 40 hours a week with the ESP games leading to the decision to limit the number of hours you can spend with the game if you are logging on using an educational account. The solitary mode of play, restricted communication, and the addictive quality of the game underline its capacity for cutting people off from social interaction rather than facilitating it. Drawing on studies of other social games such as World of Warcraft [7], it can be said that the game creates a diffused social atmosphere: by providing the sense of playing for an audience (e.g., other players or viewers who track high scores provide the motivation to compete) and a sense of social presence (e.g., feeling a connection with play partners who are particularly in-tune with oneself, matching words and scoring quickly). However, these qualities only create a sense of being social and do not actually engender social interactions that are meaningful and worthwhile.

**Networks vs. Communities**

In its emphasis on efficiency Google Image Labeler considers individuals as identical building blocks that become part of the game mechanics. There is little attention on individuals’ experience of the game or the community formed around it (that can potentially create an opportunity for bridging social capital). The game is “social” only in that it aggregates the many tags of images in order to create a big repository of image tags. In this manner, Google Image Labeler represents the view of community as a network.

Google Image Labeler is a clear example of how the web can be used to aggregate the small contributions of individuals to complete difficult tasks. However, it is important to note that when the term social is used to refer to online environments such as Google Image Labeler certain aspects or possibilities of the social are excluded. The emphasis is on parts and the whole is assumed to be nothing more than the sum of interchangeable parts. Participation is then reduced to “being a part of” or in the context of technology “to be connected to the network”. This characteristic is reminiscent of assembly line in its treatment of individuals as part of industrial machines. The difference is that computational machines do not require the physical labor of the individual but her intellectual labor in order to secure efficiency. The individual is, nonetheless, treated as an interchangeable part in the operations of the machine. The work is similarly meaningless and does not support self-expression, communication, or social interaction.

However, being connected to a network is not the same as being social. Similarly, to take part in something does not equate participation. By reducing the community of players to a network, Google Image Labeler fails to realize both the individual and collective potentials of participation in a collective activity such as commitment, responsibility, care and learning to name a few.

Moreover, to regard social as the aggregate of individuals might lead to products that undermine the significance of collective will and action. For example, consider Amazon’s Mechanical Turk that functions similar to Google Image Labeler. People post tasks on Amazon’s Mechanical Turk and others perform the tasks for what is often a small amount of pay. As Jonathan Zittrain observes, it is not unimaginable that an action like making a call to a member of congress stating “how much you like or hate healthcare reform” can be put out on a system like these leading to a situation of distrust in the validity and authenticity of collective action [26].

**CONCLUSION**

Social media create environments that vary in their capacity for social engagement. Drawing on the case of Google Image Labeler, this paper points to the possible relationship of the character of participation in social media environments and their form and structure. It also underlines the significance of basic assumptions about peoples’ motivation for participating in activities informing design decisions. The sole emphasis on efficiency and
design decisions such as blocking communication among players and de-emphasizing the actual purpose of the game engender a passive form of engagement. Thus, Google Image Labeler fails to realize both the individual and collective potential of a collaborative activity such as commitment, learning, and cooperation to achieve a shared goal. This leads to an unsatisfying experience for the players, which ultimately undermines the goal of labeling images for better search results.

This analysis improves the understanding of behaviors and experiences around Google Image Labeler, pointing to the need for systematic inquiry into the basic assumptions and values that ground design activities and their consequences in action and experience. Such inquiry is important for informing design theory and practice in the context of social media and networked technologies. Its significance, however, goes beyond social media as design practice is increasingly involved in creating environments that mediate social interaction and collaborative work marked by its move into areas such as service design or organization design and management.

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