# The Enshittification of the Creative Internet

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The creative internet is a network of online platforms, creative people, and communities where artists learn and grow together while also showcasing their artwork to others. While this space of people, technology, and routine presentation of art once held such promise for creatives, for many, that place is something that now only exists in memory. This paper presents an interview study with 22 visual artists who share their art in online social spaces. Taking a historical approach, we explore their journeys across the creative internet, the promise it held for them as artists, and the creative internet became enshittified as online platforms got bigger. Through the lens of enshittification, we explore how changes in platform policy, design, and algorithmic mediation have shifted the creative practices of artists, and how, as artists contend with enshittified platform spaces, they are resilient and forward joy in their art. We discuss the role that nostalgia plays in the concept of enshittification, contributing insight into why people stay on increasingly hostile platforms, and suggest opportunities for platforms and artists alike to forward joy and resilience in the face of a now shittier internet.

Additional Key Words and Phrases: nostalgia, creative work, artists, community, enshittification, platform ecosystems

## 1 Introduction

The internet once held much promise—it connected people who may have not otherwise found each other [16], it allowed for the easy sharing of knowledge [34], while also driving people to participate in the knowledge-sharing and creation process [14]. The participatory culture of the internet connected people by encouraging them to participate in and contribute to the co-construction of online spaces [13, 14, 34, 40]. The internet also led people to reexamine notions of community [32], how we navigate and present ourselves in networked publics [11], and other routine practices of our everyday lives.

For example, many artists were drawn to art sharing platforms like DeviantArt [41, 65] and photo sharing platforms such as Flickr [57] to share their art. The design and construction of online art sharing spaces has been the subject of CSCW research, such as when scholars developed a tool to share creative works in progress [46]. These platforms were not without their challenges, however, with issues such as art theft and trolling persisting well past the advent of our current social media ecosystem [62]. Yet, there was a promise embedded into the early places of the creative internet, where artists could come together and share their artwork with creative peers and appreciative audiences [78]. Over time, though, as social media platforms grew from small startups into large

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corporate entities through corporate acquisitions, hostile takeovers, and mergers, the internet started to lose that sense of promise. It instead started to feel like the creative spaces of the internet were increasingly getting *worse* for their users. People still have fond memories for that early internet though, and as nostalgia is so good at doing, those fond memories tend to distort any perception of flaws to make room for fondness [60, 75].

Enshittification is the process of online platforms shifting from being user-friendly to becoming a primarily profit-driven machine that ultimately ruins the general user experience [23]. This paper explores how online platforms become enshittified and how artists using these platforms to share art contend with enshittification. Enshittification is particularly felt by artists that routinely create, share, market, and potentially monetize their creative work while drawing on platform infrastructures, the foundational building blocks of any large-scale system, to enact these routines [64, 71, 77]. When infrastructures for routine creative work change or break down, people often work to resolve or repair these breakdowns in various ways, such as drawing on other infrastructures, technologies, and tools [39, 74]. Breakdowns, however, can become chronic and managing them can become a part of an everyday routine as well [71]. This is especially true for artists online as their work takes place on and is supported by online platforms whose infrastructures are in a constant state of flux [5, 25]. They may resist changes to a platform [20], or work to adapt to that change depending on how closely the change relates to their values [19]. Unless the infrastructural change of a platform aligns with a person's or community's values, they may vote with their digital feet and leave [30], finding new spaces on similar platforms that evoke nostalgic feelings [75]. Enshittification as a phenomenon, however, suggests that the cost of switching platforms is high and prevents people from leaving platforms that treat them badly [22]. Is this really the case? Are people really trapped on shitty platforms? Or are they simply choosing to use platforms, rather than be used by them?

To explore this question of switching costs and platform use, we take a historical narrative approach to examine the journeys of 22 visual artists from their first forays into sharing their art online to their current realities of contending with an increasingly enshittified platform ecosystem. Through an interview study, we explore how the routine creative work of artists is mediated by and through the online platforms where they share their art. We discuss how shifting platform posting methods, algorithms, and policies, disrupt artists' creative routines. We find that, rather than using a singular platform to share art at any given time, visual artists often move from platform to platform to follow social and creative connections [30], and often resist what has been called "influencer creep" [7] by electing to limit their use of or leave platforms that are not meeting their needs [21, 30]. The artists we spoke to grounded their decisions to change platforms or how change how they use platforms in nostalgia - fond memories of interactions with platforms or people before those platforms got shitty for them. We contribute a critical engagement with the phenomenon of enshittification within a social computing context, examining the reasons why artists stay on hostile platforms through an exploration of their resilience strategies. In discussing the role of nostalgia in these decisions, we find that it is nostalgic feelings for the people and the communities, rather than the platforms of the creative internet, that drive artists to stay and continue using enshittified platforms.

## 2  Related Work

In this section we discuss relevant literature. We first explore the concept of routines as they are supported by infrastructures, the large-scale systems that serve as the foundational basis for routine societal function. When infrastructures fail, sometimes they fail unevenly, and can cause chronic disruption to people's everyday routines. People often find ways to be resilient in these moments of disruption, drawing on multiple infrastructures, both human and technical, to enact their everyday

routines. With this foundational basis, we turn to a discussion of creative labor and being an artist in an online context and how artists and other online content creators are often bearing the brunt of platform infrastructural change.

## 2.1 Routines, Infrastructures & Resilience

Routines are repeated, recognizable patterns of behavior actions carried out by individuals or groups of individuals within a specific context [29]. Whereas routines are often thought of as being stable and inflexible to change, scholarship has highlighted how they are both adaptable and flexible in different contexts and conditions [61]. Routines are best understood as a system with two interacting parts, the ostensive: he underlying knowledge of the routine, and the performative: how that routine is performed in context. [61]. What is key in understanding routines is that how people perform different routine patterns of actions and behavior will depend on the context within which these routines take place: people will do different things at different times, depending on what their goals may be.

To enact routines, people often draw on infrastructures [28, 71]. Infrastructures are the underlying, foundational structures of any large-scale system that supports routine societal functions [71, 79]. While the term "infrastructure" may conjure large-scale public works projects like building highways or laying fiber optic cables for internet in rural areas, information and communication technologies are also forms of infrastructure in that they are built on information systems and that they support the routine process of work and communication that people rely on every day in multiple different contexts [33]. For example, artists living in rural communities without easy access to art classes may draw on platforms like YouTube, their internet connection, computers or phones, and the labor of other working artists to learn new artistic techniques.

Infrastructures are sociotechnical systems that are shaped by, but also shape, social practices that take place on, by, and through them [28, 79]. Infrastructures take on meaning or change in meaning depending on the routine social practices taking place and the actors—human and non-human—involved [28, 79]. This relationship is continually negotiated between people in various contexts, meaning that infrastructures are also relational systems [79]. Human involvement in these relational systems, the *human infrastructure*, are what allows for infrastructures to function as a gathering point where routine work can take place, as nown and unknown humans maintain and animate the infrastructures that allow for routine societal function [50].

Given that routines are actions and behaviors that are enacted by, through, and within larger infrastructural systems, the question naturally emerges of what happens when infrastructures break or fail to support these routines [71, 79]. Infrastructures are largely invisible, we really only notice that they're there when they breakdown or fail to meet people's needs (an *infrastructural breakdown* [79]), or when they routinely disrupt some people's lives in ways that they do not for others [71, 79]. The unevenness in how infrastructures function and potentially disrupt people's everyday routines comes from the fact that infrastructures are not value-neutral. Rather, the designers, curators, and maintainers of these systems all embedded their personal values and biases into infrastructures [10], and these values and biases are at the core of routine infrastructural disruption [71].

In HCI research, the way infrastructures disrupt people's everyday routines has been studied in the context of marginalized groups. For example, the struggles that military veterans have with reestablishing everyday routines after returning from combat zones [72], or how neurodiverse or d/Deaf and Hard of Hearing people who turn to online platforms like TikTok to find community, have, until quite recently, not had the the available infrastructures to ensure the platform was accessible to them [54, 74]. Yet, in all these cases, members of the communities in question drew on many different infrastructures to recreate their disrupted routines, a practice known as *critical infrastructuring* [12, 71, 74]. Resilience is the study of how people bounce back from moments of

threat, harm, or disruption, and critical infrastructuring is the practice of being resilient, but it is also the practice of small forms of resilience in the face of existing power structures [68]. In drawing on many infrastructures to be resilient, or to make seamless routine experiences [83], people are able to engage in their routines once more.

## 2.2 Creative Labor: The Highs and Lows of Sharing Creative Work Online

The internet is one of the myriad places that people are drawing on to enact their everyday routines. These days, most interaction between people online takes place on social media, "free" platforms ruled by platform metrics [25, 64]. Platform metrics are the likes, clicks, or views a piece of user-produced media receives, and are a quantifiable measure of engagement that is easily translated into quantifiable data that is then sold to advertisers [15, 64]. Platform metrics are increasingly legible and visible to the average social media user over time [64], but these metrics also serve as a source of anxiety that creatives must cope with as they do their routine creative work [25]. Metrics can reshape routine creative practice through their disruption of established routines around creativity, creative work, and self-presentation [7, 77]. Visual artists are among the many that experience these pressures and anxieties, and these metrics and these metrics can be very disruptive to the routines people have around making and sharing art, as these metrics are often the only way of telling if a creative piece shared online is successful or if the creative labor involved in producing it is worth the investment [64].

Creative labor describes the work involved in professionalizing [17], monetizing [17, 53], making visible [5, 18, 25, 53], and relating to one's audience [7, 8, 18, 52, 77]. Importantly, any definition of creative labor must encompass the labor *around* the labor of being creative, the labor of doing actual creative work [77]. An artist's routine creative labor involves both the work of producing a piece of art, and then labor of translating that piece of art into something that is easily consumable and translatable on one [7, 18, 53, 77], or across many [52], online platforms. HCI research tends to focus on visibility labors, or how creatives shift and adapt their creative routines largely around ensuring that their art is visible and translatable to platforms. This is of particular interest as unpredictability in markets, audiences, other creatives, and platforms are a key source of anxiety [25].

The additional labors that artists and other creatives must do to use online social platforms points to a broader shift in the ways that humans routinely draw on online spaces to enact their everyday routines. Online spaces have always made visible human elements of infrastructure, as, for many communities, it is easier to find social support and connection online [27, 76]. For artists, the human and technical infrastructures of online spaces have often served an inspirational purpose as well, with artists drawing on content recommendation algorithms to articulate and animate their creative identities [78]. When artists or other creatives go online to seek support either for their creative practice or for understanding how the online platforms that they are using work in the first place [5, 6], they are engaging with human infrastructures for social and creative support. Yet, as technology policy shifts, users are finding themselves interacting less with that supporting community, and more with "experts." For example, when WebMD, a popular medical website, got rid of their community forums to shift to an expert-based model for medical advice, their userbase shrunk as the community forms were places of social support that sustained human connection [38]. WebMD got shittier as the human infrastructures for social support were replaced.

## 2.3 Enshittification

The gradual shift away from platforms valuing their existing userbases and increasingly focusing on instituting logics that seem to undermine the users of that platforms is a process known as enshittification [23]. When platforms enshittify, they slowly start to de-prioritize the values and

priorities their userbase after getting them hooked on a platform [24] and then switch to a business model designed to maximize profits [22, 23, 67]. The experiences on online platforms that artists and other creatives frequent have gotten progressively worse over time, and the platforms owners have deprioritized the needs of their userbase in favor of data extraction to sell to advertisers. This is challenging for many artists using these platforms, these platforms are so foundational to their development of artistic identities, which requires routine interaction with artistic peers [78].

So why don't people leave? Well, sometimes they do. Platform change often is met with a frank assessment of that change and its alignment with the community's, or their, values [21], which can, on occasion, lead to whole communities departing platforms [30]. Yet for the most part, people seem to stay on these platforms, even when these platforms treat them poorly. Doctorow [22] argues "...when switching costs are high enough, people will keep using the products and services even though they hate those products and services." Enshittification is alive and well, and it, too, routinely shapes routine creative labor and the experience of being a a visual artist online. This slow march toward the tipping of the scales between a platform that is valuable to its users, and the platform that is valuable to its business partners, is enshittification: the death knell of a vibrant, open, and creative internet [23]. The constantly-shifting platform and increasingly enshittified platform environment suggests that creatives are not consistently able to draw on platform infrastructures to enact their creative routines or find value in their work shaped by and through their own intentions. Missing from many of these conversations are the relationships that people have with their creative work and the human infrastructures that sustain that creative work. Fondness for such communities and spaces is often embedded into the nostalgic feelings people have toward platforms in these moments, such as how TikTok is evocative of all of the good things about the now-defunct Vine [75]. In this paper, we unpack this question of how the creative spaces of the internet are getting worse for creators, and how, in the face of enshittification, people are drawing on the human infrastructures of these spaces for support and, through this support, are resilient in the face of enshittification.

## 3 Method

In this section we detail our method, where we take a semi-structured interview approach rooted in participant narratives of their lives. We describe how we recruited the 22 visual artists we spoke to, touch on their demographics and artist identities, before we describe our interview approach and analysis method. We conclude with a brief reflection on limitations and positionality.

### 3.1 Participant Recruitment & Demographics

The criteria to participate in this study was that people needed consider themselves artists, use online platforms, and be over 18. After receiving ethical approval from our university's Institutional Review Board, we recruited participants in several different ways. First, the research team distributed fliers to offline artist spaces (e.g., art stores) across several states in the western United States. Secondly, the first author shared the call for participants on their personal social media accounts and in several Discord communities where they served as a moderator (with agreement from the rest of the moderation team). Thirdly, participants were recruited via direct solicitation on Reddit (13 users) and Instagram (18 users), where the first author used their well-established personal accounts to contact people discussing being artists and sharing their art online. Finally, the research team contacted five artists within their personal social networks who lived in diverse geographic settings within the United States. This approach has been used before when contacting contact creators within the HCI space to ensure diverse viewpoints [52].

Potential participants were given an option to complete a short questionnaire hosted on our university's Qualtrics website, which collected contact information and some basic participant

| Recruitment Site | Participant(s) |
|---|---|
| Personal Social Networks | P1, P7, P8, P13, P15 |
| Extended Social Networks | P11, P16 |
| Discord | P2, P3, P4, P5, P09 P10, P12 |
| Twitter | P6, P14 |
| Reddit | P17, P18, P22 |
| Instagram | P19, P20, P21 |

Table 1. List of Participant Recruitment Sites

demographics (e.g., age and pronouns used). We received 14 responses on Qualtrics, a further five were received on Discord. From Reddit we recruited three participants, and from Instagram we recruited three participants. From these contacts, we then used the snowball recruitment method [4] and asked that participants share our call for participants with their artist friends and colleagues, resulting in contact from an additional two working artists. Table 1 details the recruitment site of each participant.

The participants in this study ranged in age from 18 to 74, and were diverse in terms of gender, racial, and artist identity. Further, we captured the types of locales where participants reported living, and ensured we had a diverse rural, suburban, and urban spread of participants. Participants reported being largely from the United States, with one participant holding dual citizenship between the United States and Canada. Table 2 shows participants as they described themselves, and Table 3 shows how these participants described their art. We note these identities as they are vital to understanding how people's artistic journeys evolved over time.

## 3.2    Interviews

We conducted 22 semi-structured interviews with visual artists working across multiple online platforms and offline spaces between May and August of 2023. We took a semi-structured approach for flexibility and natural flow in our interviews [70] and followed a narrative approach for rapport building and understanding how participants grew as artists over time through storytelling and personal narratives [42]. Two interviews were conducted via Discord Chat (P17, P18), three were conducted over the telephone (P16, P19, P20), one was conducted in personal at a local restaurant (P11), and the remaining 16 interviews (P1 - 10, P12-15, P21, P22) took place over Zoom. Each interview lasted around an hour (range: 60-120 minutes) and was recorded and transcribed with verbal participant consent. A small grant for graduate student research from our university was used to transcribe four interviews (P11, P14, P19, P20) using the transcription service, Rev, as these had poor audio quality.

The interviews were divided into several parts, with a built-in break in the middle for participant and researcher comfort. In the first section, we focused on building rapport and learning more about the participant's identity as a person and artist, their history doing art, and how they came to the art they're currently doing. Participants revealed early joys of learning how to draw, in particular, and how they eventually started to share their art online. When asking about these spaces, we again focused on the journeys artists took as they moved from online platform to platform (or offline), focusing on why they left, or why they use particular platforms over others. We paid close attention to problems that participants had with particular online platforms and spaces, as prior work has drawn attention to conflicts between artist goals and what platform infrastructures allow [77] or normatively enforce through their logics [7, 18, 25]. The interview also included

| # | Age | Gender Expression | Pronouns | Race / Ethnicity | Location |
|---|-----|-------------------|----------|------------------|----------|
| 1 | 31 | Non-Binary (or vibes) | she/they | Black | Urban |
| 2 | 21 | Nonbinary/Transmasc | they/them | White | Urban |
| 3 | 28 | Nonbinary, Trans | they/them | White, Ashkenazi | Urban |
| 4 | 29 | Non-binary/Demigirl | she/they | Mixed (White & African American) | Suburban |
| 5 | 21 | Woman | she/her | Hispanic/Latinx | Suburban |
| 6 | 28 | Cis Woman | she/her | White British | Rural |
| 7 | 65 | Male | he/him | White/Caucasian | Urban |
| 8 | 32 | Male | he/him | White | Rural |
| 9 | 32 | Non-binary | they/them | White (Eastern European) | Rural |
| 10 | 28 | Cis Woman | she/her | Latina | Urban |
| 11 | 74 | Male | he/him | White | Suburban |
| 12 | 27 | Butch | she/her | White | Suburban |
| 13 | 33 | Woman | she/her | Caucasian | Rural |
| 14 | 25 | Trans Woman | she/her | Caucasian | Suburban |
| 15 | 30 | Woman | she/her | Latina | Suburban |
| 16 | 24 | Male | he/him | White | Rural |
| 17 | 29 | Male | he/him | White/Mexican | Urban |
| 18 | 54 | Male | he/him | Caucasian | Urban |
| 19 | 68 | Female | she/her | White | Suburban |
| 20 | 34 | Normal (Male) | he/him | White | Suburban |
| 21 | 18 | Refused | she/her | Asian American | Urban |
| 22 | 37 | Female | she/her | Caucasian | Rural |

Table 2. Participant Demographics, as they described themselves, we have standardized the capitalization, but not the spellings of identities throughout.

| # | How would you describe yourself as an artist? | # | How would you describe yourself as an artist? |
|---|------------------------------------------------|---|------------------------------------------------|
| 1 | Illustrator | 12 | Doodler |
| 2 | Animator / Artist | 13 | Photographer / Crafter |
| 3 | Freelance Artist / Digital Artist / Illustrator | 14 | Multi-Media Artist |
| 4 | Illustrator | 15 | Digital Artist / Illustrator |
| 5 | Artist | 16 | Epoxy Resin / Floral Presser |
| 6 | Comic Artist / Illustrator | 17 | Digital Artist |
| 7 | Sculptor (In Wood) | 18 | Storyteller, Comic Books |
| 8 | Wood Intarsia | 19 | Artist [of] Books ([that] Delight and Spark Creativity in Others) |
| 9 | Comic Artist / Illustrator | 20 | Found & Recycled Materials Instrument Builder (Luthier) |
| 10 | Hobby Artist | 21 | Mixed Media & Fiber Artist / Photographer |
| 11 | Dada Abstract Color Painting (mixed media artist) | 22 | Multi-Media Artist |

Table 3. Participant Artist Identities, as they described themselves.

| Platform | # Participants Using |
|---|---|
| Instagram | 21 |
| Twitter (X) | 14 |
| Discord | 13 |
| YouTube | 13 |
| Facebook | 12 |
| Tumblr | 11 |
| Patreon | 10 |
| Google Search | 9 |
| DeviantArt | 8 |
| Reddit | 8 |

Table 4. Number of Participants Reporting Regular Use of Various Online Creative Spaces and Tools

questions around places participants go to for social and creative support, from which there was an emergent conversation about the social nature of being an artist online as well as the challenges that platforms introduced to being an artist in these spaces.

### 3.3 Analysis

Once transcribed, the first author conducted two rounds of coding on the interviews. The first was platform-specific, focusing on the use of various creative spaces (on- and offline) and tools that artists routinely drew on to express themselves creatively and get support for their art. These are shown in Table 4. Once these were collected, a secondary round of open coding took place, with the first author assigning codes to 10 transcripts using an approach based in grounded theory [80], which is commonly used in HCI and CSCW research [1, 45, 77]. At this point, the first and second author met and discussed how to best collapse the codes into broader categories and the final 12 interviews were subsequently coded.

Emergent from these conversations were themes of frustration from artists about the speed at which online platforms like Instagram or Twitter (X) demanded to maintain audience engagement (see Table 4). Participants, however, also spoke at length about the joy they had, and friendships they had made, over the course of their artistic careers, particularly online. They described platforms such as Reddit, DeviantArt, and Discord as common places where they went for social and creative support as artists over time.

With this narrative in hand, we turned to the literature on routine creative work, content creation, and poor experiences with platforms by content creators, which led us to the concept of enshittification [23] as a means by which to characterize and understand the changes over time that our participants described. The first author went back to the coded transcripts and explored how enshittification shaped these experiences further, focusing on moments where platforms seemed to exist in a contradictory space of being positives and negatives. The narrative of this coding pass is detailed in the results section below emerged from our reengagement with the emergent categories of our codes following our exploration of the literature. Here, the narratives focused on *why* our participants described platforms as becoming more limiting to them and how they were pushing back against feeling trapped on unsupportive platforms.

### 3.4 Positionality & Reflections

As a queer artist, the I (Ellen, the first author) find myself facing these same questions about where to share art and how to prioritize what to share and when as the participants in this study. I barely

share my art online these days for fear of it being used to train generative AI, which is felt by many artistic communities as a negative, despite there being potential uses for such tools for accessibility, for example [3]. Bryan (the second author) is a musician and a firm supporter of people sharing their art online and has been since finding Legend of Zelda fanart on DeviantArt around when the site first went live in late 2000. I found DeviantArt a little later, maybe 2002, looking for Sailor Moon WinAMP skins. I say all this to say that we are both creative people and we are both Internet Olds, which has shaped how we've approached this analysis as well. We both remember what the Internet Once Was, but we also both know that the internet has always been a shitty place [63], and is constantly finding new, exciting ways to be shitty. While we endeavored to remain neutral in accounting participant experiences, it is because of our experiences as people who have been online for a long time that we are able to find the nuances of enshittification in what participants described.

## 4 The Enshittification of the Creative Internet

This section details the enshittification of the creative internet through a narrative arc. In the first section, we discuss the early experiences that participants had sharing their art online, predominately in Web 1.0 platforms such as DeviantArt and the blogging platform, Live Journal. While these platforms still persist today, they are unique in that they have endured through the advent of social media. In this section, we discuss how participants found community and places to learn the creative techniques they still employ today, as well as discuss how their departure from these spaces was largely following broader community movements to new platforms.

In the second section, we detail the experiences that participants had with the platforms they regularly use, such as Tumblr, Twitter, and Instagram. We discuss the positive experiences participants had initially in these spaces in terms of networking, finding friendships, and growing as artists. In the subsequent section, we detail the struggles participants had with various platform policy changes that have impacted them in negative ways.

Finally, in the last section, we detail how artists are letting go and focusing on joy as a form of resistance, falling back on nostalgic priorities and connections to take away the power that platforms have over them as artists.

### 4.1 The Unshitty Creative Internet: Finding Community and Growing As Artists on Web 1.0 Platforms

Many of our participants have been sharing art online for over a decade. The process of getting online to share art was something that began when they were young, and in a different era of the Internet in the early aughts. *"I started sharing my art online when I was 13,"* P1, an 31 year old illustrator, explained. Others were of a similar age: P6, now 28, was 14; P15, now 30, was in middle school; and P17, who first shared his art online in 2012, was 19. Participants described being drawn to early platforms as places to find friends or community, and being pulled into these places by their friends. P17, a digital artist, explained that he started sharing his art on DeviantArt *"because a friend back then told me I should really start sharing [my art] online."* Other participants shared memories of these early spaces that were touched by a sense of cringe (embarrassment), such P1's assessment of their early DeviantArt account: *"That account still exists on the internet. I don't tell people what it is, but I do go back and get artwork to show people what it looked like, because it was really bad."*

*4.1.1* ***Finding Places to Learn and Grow as Artists****.* These early creative spaces also provided places of learning for participants where they could hone their art style and creative technique. P12, a self-described doodler, laughed as she told us, *"I would pull references when I was on DeviantArt all*

*the time."* P12 was certainly not alone in learning from DeviantArt. P10, a hobby artist, explains, *"A lot of tutorials that I followed [were] from a very specific artist on DeviantArt who did work, almost 95%, in Copic markers."* For P10, finding someone she could learn from was vital to her development as an artist in her chosen form. P15, similarly, used DeviantArt to find tutorials, and learn *"through many, many tutorials on DeviantArt. I kind of just [learned] on my own what worked for me."* Self-driven, visual learning was key for both P10 and P15 in gaining familiarity how to do various art techniques, and DeviantArt provided a place where they could easily learn new techniques. Other participants discussed using platforms like YouTube (P5, P8, P16) or Pinterest (P13, P15, P19, P22) to learn the various artistic techniques they used as a part of their routine artistic practices. In these places, participants found community and a space to discuss and share their art. They also found ways to improve their art through the creative work of others, learning from their peers. And, for the most part, these spaces were spoke about in a positive light—even if they felt the art they shared when using these spaces was a little "cringy" at times.

*4.1.2* ***The Unshitty Times on Social Media.*** The transition from the disparate networks of blogging platforms and art websites), to Web 2.0 and social media was one that, initially, had a net benefit for many participants. The artists we spoke to identified several reasons for the transition away from these early platforms, but mostly they stated they were following community. P4 explains,

> "I don't think anything really like drew me away from DeviantArt in terms of posting on it, I think I just moved where other people were moving."

Many of the artists we spoke to left DeviantArt or stopped posting there regularly because they followed their friends or online community to new spaces. Often participants would speak nostalgically for the community they had found on DevinantArt and their desire to recreate that community elsewhere as DeviantArt was no longer home to that community. For many participants, this also marked a transition from Web 1.0 platforms to Web 2.0 social media platforms.

These new, networked social media platforms helped participants find larger audiences for their art. P14, a multi-media artist, called it *"a nice little delight"* when people found her art, adding that if *"it's [an art piece] you've dropped like two years ago that you've completely forgotten about. [...] [S]omeone shared it with their people and all those people are now sharing it."* Others spoke of how the connections to their audiences facilitated by social media led to close friendships and professional collaborations. The interactive and networked nature of these new online social platforms where participants found themselves was a net benefit for participants. Sharing art online helped forge meaningful connections with others that were foundational as to *why* artists continued to share their art online.

These new social media platforms were also easier for participants to use to connect with others and, as P14 described earlier, have their art be found by others. Participants discussed various experiences they had with these platforms. P9, a comic artist and illustrator, focused on their experience as a user on Tumblr, explaining that they *"really like the general vibe of Tumblr, how you can curate your own experience. [Y]ou won't see anything necessarily on your feed that you you're not signing up for."* Other participants pointed toward certain affordances that offered a similar level of control over their art, how it was seen, and how it was archived, on these new platforms. P5, an artist who shared her art on several platforms, talked about how using Tumblr made her life easier:

> "Okay, I make a new post, grab the image that I have that's already been made. [...] And if I want to have it scheduled to upload a certain time, then Tumblr already does that. [S]ome sites you have to either pay for it, or you just don't have that option."

P15 agreed with P5's point and added that Tumblr's tagging system is *"easy to like, [...] get your art to actually be in front of people's eyeballs."* Many participants focused on the idea of the use of hashtags and other searchable artifacts that have multiple meanings and conversational uses on platforms like Tumblr [9] or Twitter [73]. For many, these tags served as a way of archiving their work. Others used entire platforms as an archive for their art, such as Twitter[1] (P6, P10) and Instagram (P1, P2). Others, like P7, P8, P20, P21 and P22, used the image and video features to showcase art works in progress.

The design of social media platforms *worked* for the artists we spoke to, serving as the underpinning of our conversations. Participants were able to draw on these platform infrastructures to do their art, share it their way, and know their art would find an audience based on platform affordances like tagging, archiving or chronological post feeds. Artists, at this juncture, were in control of their art, and how it was archived, searched for, and discovered on the platforms they regularly used. They were able to find friendships and connect with other artists through these platforms, as well as curate their experiences on these platforms, as P9 explained. Our participants were locked into these spaces, routinely sharing their art, and reaping the benefits of these new social media platforms being great connectors of people, art, and creative energy [23]. But alas, this time was not to last.

## 4.2 Things Get Shitty: Struggles with Creative Practice in the Midst Platform Change

Participants viewed social media as a good place to share their art with others, connect to other artists, and express themselves creatively and through collaboration at the start of most of our participants using the platforms. Despite these generally positive feelings, our participants discussed grappling with changes to made to the platforms they routinely used and how these changes impacted their ability to create. P16, a woodworker and epoxy resin artist, saw the damage using these platforms did to friends and family and severely restricted his use of all social media except for, occasionally, YouTube when he wanted to explore and learn new creative techniques. More commonly, participants avoided sharing art on platforms such as Facebook, as that was *"where all the racist boomers have flocked to, unfortunately"* (P4), or Instagram because they were connected to many family members there who may not approve of, for instance, their art's queer themes (e.g., P4, P15). Participants cited personal reasons, rather than issues with platform infrastructures or governance for why they did not use—or only used in specific ways—certain platforms.

Participants did, however, draw attention to concerns around a loss of fidelity in their art if it was shared on certain platforms, particularly if their chosen medium was not one well-suited to whatever platform they were sharing on. P1, an illustrator, explained: *"When you're working with traditional [artistic] mediums, transposing them into a digital platform can be a little tricky, especially when you're working with [...] sculpture and things like that."* This concern was most evident for many of the artists we spoke to who did art in 3-dimensions such as woodworking, needlework, or bookmaking (P7, P8, P16, P19, P20, P21).

As platform priorities and policies shifted, new potential challenges for artists who were routinely using these platforms to share and promote their art were introduced, such as how images were cropped or how art was datafied. Art got more challenging to find, and, as platforms shifted their preferred mediums from one modality to another, such as from static images to video on Instagram [36], the artists we spoke to found themselves having to adapt both their creative practices and what kinds of art they shared on platforms that, increasingly, did not feel as though they cared for their userbase.

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[1]While we understand that Twitter now is called X, these interviews took place in May - July of 2023, and the name change was very new. For this reason, we will be referring to the Platform Formerly Known as Twitter as "Twitter."
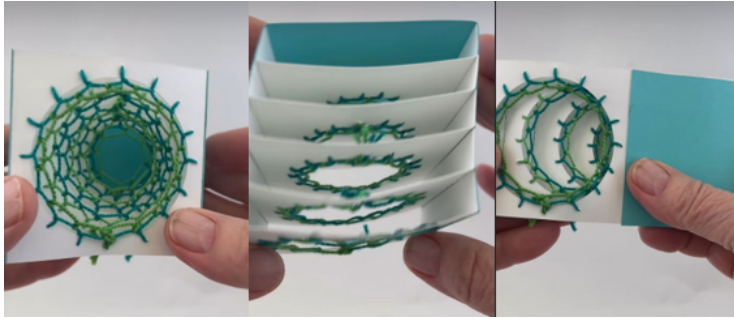
Fig. 1. Screen grabs from a video P19 made showcasing one of her books.

### 4.2.1 *The Sociotechnical Enshittification of Sharing Art: How Platform Posting Mechanisms and Options Lead to Changing Creative Practice*. Emergent from our conversations were two key issues with platform posting mechanisms: issues with translation and flattening of time and issues with finding an audience while adhering to specific platform mandates. Participants expressed concern over how to translate art into an a medium that can be observed and appreciated on a screen. The translational considerations that artists had to make were primarily focused on how to capture the feel of their art, such as P19, a 68 year old bookmaker, who realized, *"photographing the kind of books that I made doesn't do it. Because every page is different and the structure is interesting."* She went on to explain, *"Even though there's two dimensions involved [in making a book], it's actually a very three-dimensional thing that you can have a relationship with.".* P19's solution was to make *"little movies"* of her books (see Figure 1 for an example).

Yet these translational considerations added additional work for the artist. P8, a wood intarsia[2] also shared videos of his artwork on Instagram and Facebook, but noted that these videos tended to flatten amount of work and time involved in producing the projects he shared. *"The few I did were when I was wood burning [were like] here's what 40 hours looks like in a minute,"* he explained. When asked to why he had not made more of these videos, he explained,

> "[Filming] probably added two hours of just fucking with the camera and knocking it over and oop gotta go back and check and make sure it's recording. They turn out looking cool, but yeah, I haven't found a good way to do that. The whole process is kind of a pain in the ass."

P8 was not alone in finding the additional work he had to do to showcase his art on Instagram or Facebook to be "a pain in the ass." Twitter's crop, which has come under fire for focusing the subjects of their crop on lighter skinned people over dark skinned people, and on women's bodies over their faces [84], is one of several image formatting features that participants discussed as frustrating when sharing their work online[3]. P4 expressed frustration with the way Twitter cropped their art and how it took multiple attempts to *"get the crop right."*

> "If I want to post more than one image, like if it's a comic strip, and [Twitter's Crop] focuses on something that it shouldn't be focused on instead of like the actual like, panel or illustration, it's a little frustrating. [...] I'll just try to go back and crop [the image] so it will look better with the Twitter crop. I don't think there is a fix unless you just posted one image at a time or a multiple tweet thread."

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[2]A term from fiber art that describes knitting together different colors and stitches to create a larger pattern or design that is also used in woodworking and applies similar practice.

[3]Another being Instagram's square images, which P1, P21, and P22 all discussed.

Translational considerations for social media to ensure their art's visibility added significant time to the creative processes of many of our participants. It added an additional factor of consideration, where posts were sometimes taken down and then put back up again to ensure that the original intent and ephemeral nature of the art in question was appropriately captured in the shared social media post. While Twitter always allowed users to post images, transitioning from a shared link to an actual image[4] [31, 43], introduced additional considerations for artists on the platform, forcing them to adjust their creative practices to meet platform demands.

Another concern participants shared when discussing their struggles with the posting mechanisms of the platforms where they routinely shared their art were shifts what kinds of content—be it art or otherwise—that platforms prioritized for algorithmic recommendation to other platform users and their desired audience. Participants discussed how Instagram, once marketed as an artist's platform, shifted prioritization to videos over static images [36]. This caused many problems for small businesses and creators [36] and has led to further tweaks to the algorithm by Instagram to correct these changes in April of 2024 [37]. These interviews, conducted in 2023, capture the interim period between these two changes, and it colored many of the opinions of the artists we spoke to. Some artists, like P22, a multi-media artist, concluded that, *"nobody looks at Instagram anymore."* For other participants, there was a clear divide around this shift in policy in 2022. P9, discussing how people found their art, explained,

> "That is kinda like what Instagram used to be before, they tried to heavily tap into videos, the reels and all those things. [...] People could find my artwork, if I used the right kind of hashtags, or, you know, if I played my cards right."

The clear delineation of "used to be before" Instagram's policy shift in 2022 is also something that P17 pointed out, explaining, *"[Instagram's] algorithm has changed [two] times since I joined[,] negatively affecting my page. In one they nuked reach of images in favor of video..."* In both of these cases, P9 and P17 had to adjust *how* they shared their art to ensure that it was seen by their friends, creative peers, and desired audiences, which is known as influencer creep [7]. While the artists we spoke to were always free to leave Instagram (some, like P12, did), staying active on the platform introduced stress. P9 explained that chasing their audience was *"always like a nonstop stress factor for me"*, particularly when their audience was fickle.

Despite this stress, neither P9 nor P17 left Instagram and P22, who joked that no one goes on Instagram, still regularly posts there because she has friends on the platform that she cares about. Even P12, who told us that she left Instagram, will occasionally login to check on her artist friends and see their new art. The artists we spoke to had "bought in" to the promises of these platforms, and were subsequently locked in to continuing to use the platform [23, 24] to stay in touch with friends and creative peers.

*4.2.2* ***A Culture of Immediacy: How Platform Algorithms Shift Creative Practice****.* When asked about how their art gets seen by other people when shared on various platforms, many participants discussed how algorithmic content recommendation on platforms impacted their creative practice. Participants described feeling like they had to constantly engage with a platform for their art to reach their desired audience. P3, a 28 year old freelance digital artist and illustrator, explained Twitter's algorithm as being very demanding, *"[I]f you take too long doing a piece, then you're not posting regularly enough, and then you get buried."* P9 expressed similar sentiments about Instagram's algorithm, *"There [is] always a struggle that I felt like, no matter how hard I try, no matter what I do, it's so hard to keep up."* For illustrators and other digital artists, platform demands were an annoying and frustrating aspect of the platforms where they shared their art. Keeping up

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[4]This move was largely seen as beneficial for selling ads in advance of Twitter's IPO in 2013.

a posting schedule on any of the platforms that they used was challenging and there was little recourse for the artists to work within the constraints of the platform.

For some of the other artists we spoke to, this perceived demand for immediacy was felt even more strongly. For the artists in our cohort working in non-traditional mediums (e.g., wood, resin, fiber), meeting platform demands was basically impossible. P7, a 66 year old sculptor of wood, explained,

> "I could see doing something like regular Instagram posts if I were making something small and easily made, you know, something that takes me a week to make kind of [a] thing. These looms take me months [...] and [it's] going to be months between each installment."

In essence, the speed at which P7 is able to produce his art, hand carved looms, has effectively removed him from any kind of audience on Instagram that exists beyond his social network. And even then, he's not sure his network is seeing his posts. It is challenging to keep an algorithmically-produced audience interested in a final product that takes months to produce without expending considerable effort in addition to the effort already involved in doing art in the first place.

A culture of immediacy is indicative of platform pressures to produce 'content' at a rapid rate and it is embedded into the design of platform algorithms [17, 64]. P9 explains, *"It's so much more easier to just take a picture of your food three times a day and post three times a day than [to] post anything with your art."* Platform pressures like the ones P7 and P9 experienced on Instagram encourage production of artless, or quicker to produce, posts for our participants. P21, an 18 year old fiber artist, explains why she does not exclusively share her cross stitching on her Instagram account, *"If I just did cross stitching, I feel like I would not be very successful because a lot of people don't know what it is. [...] I wouldn't be posting enough to get [the] audience engaged enough."* Lack of engagement from an imagined audience is an concern that the platform creates through a lack of generalized engagement with an artist's posts and by deprioritizing the visibility of what the artist *does* share.

Facing the reality that their art took time, some of the artists we spoke to made choices about what kinds of art they would do and share online. In doing so, they at once broadened the types of art they were doing and subsequently sharing online, while also actively making choices about what art would, and would not, keep their audience engaged with their art. P21, for instance, explains that if she doesn't post frequently enough on Instagram, *"[i]t doesn't go into the feed, so it's not gonna get seen by the other artists or people."* P21's solution was to shift what kinds of art she shared on her Instagram. She explained, *"I just do more photography because it's gonna be seen quicker."*

Other participants chose to shift their art in other ways that also cut down on the production time required. Many participants discussed sketching in various ways. Some participants shared their sketches privately with friends and other creative peers (P2, P3, P9, P12, P14), while others shared their sketches publicly on Instagram or Twitter. Sometimes sketches would garner more audience attention than actual completed art pieces. P9 explains,

> "Whenever [my post] had my hand holding a pen or a marker or whatever I was working with at that time on the picture, or just like the pens [and] pencils lined up next to a sketch, that would always perform better than the actual finished artwork."

When faced with a constant demand for more engagement with the platform to ensure the visibility of their art, the artists we spoke to would do things like share unfinished artwork like sketches or shift what they posted to mediums that were more easily produced, such as photographs. These practices lessen the quality of what is shared on the platform, transitioning from finished pieces of arts to works in progress.

*4.2.3 **Profit-Centered Policies: How Platform Policy Impacts Creative Practice**.* On Instagram or Twitter, artists are just one group of people who happen to use the platform. Other platforms market themselves directly as providing a platform for craftspeople and artists to sell or showcase their art, such as Etsy (actively used by P8, P9, and P22) or ArtStation (used by P3, P5, and P9). Etsy, in particular, has recently come under fire for punitive policies to its craftsperson and artist userbase [67][5] P22 explained, *"I prefer not to be selling to Etsy, but it's less complicated."* Many participants would rather sell their art elsewhere, but figuring out how to do that, how to attract customers, and how to keep those customers engaged consistently was far more complicated than simply dealing with Etsy and their platform policy.

One of the issues that participants pointed to was the fact that, as P8 explains it, *"Etsy takes their cut"*. It is expensive to use Etsy to sell art. P7, who decided not to use Etsy to sell his handmade looms, clarified: *"I would have to almost double the price of my looms in order to make anything on them if I were trying to sell them through Etsy."* Etsy's overhead policies were a major factor in why some of the artists we spoke to did not use Etsy. In 2022, when Etsy reported record profits, they raised their fees to sellers, making it next to impossible for artists who create art on spec to absorb the up-front production costs of many pieces of art they were selling [49, 67]. P22, who makes a sizable chunk of her living off of Etsy, further clarified the problems she saw with Etsy's current policy decisions:

> "[Etsy is] being monstrous right now. [...] They reserve 75% of your income for 45 days, or until you ship items. And they said, well, they have these reasons, but then the reasons are very vague. So they're ending up putting a lot of shops in reserve, and those shops can't afford to stay open. So they're basically shutting shops down as a result of this new policy. [...] But the whole thing [about Etsy] is it's supposed to be handmade creatives, makers, people who are not big businesses, people who are small and who are not hugely profitable. So doing that is basically working against the whole handmade idea. It doesn't make sense to me."

One of the major components of enshittifcation is the abandonment of users in favor of bigger and bigger profits [23]. We see this abandonment manifesting as platform policy, as P22 explains, but the way those policies manifest is so antithetical to the supposed purpose of the platform for it's users that it seems "monstrous." While platforms like Instagram can shift their algorithm slightly to make it challenging for visual artists to get their art seen in their desired audiences' feeds, Etsy's policies are more aggressive, and more devastating, to the small-scale artists using the platform.

## 4.3 Resisting Enshittification

In the face of many of these challenges, participants talked about how they tried to push back against the hegemonic idea of how the platforms thought they should behave as "content creators" in these spaces. Namely, that they should feed the ever-hungry platform. The artists we spoke to described small acts of resistance and resilience in the face of these pressures. Resistance in that they refused to play the platform's game, and resilience in that they pushed themselves to focus on themselves and their artist goals when using these platforms.

*4.3.1 **Rethinking Platform Use, Instead of Being Used By Platforms**.* The artists we spoke to pushed back against platform demands in numerous ways, but the most prevalent of these tactics

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[5]A recent example of this is Etsy's decision to hold as much as 75% of the commissions sellers make from sales in reserve for up to 45 days, while also taking commission and advertising fees out of the remaining 25%. For many Etsy sellers, who produce handmade goods upon order, this policy means that the upfront costs to produce these handmade goods must be absorbed prior to the seller receiving any funds, a move that can put many artisans in a precarious financial position. There is also little transparency as to why these funds are being held in reserve, or why they are being held for so long.

was around how they used the platforms where they were sharing their art. P14, a 25 year old multi-media artist would draw on platform features to promote her artwork" *"Whenever you [make] a new post, you know, not everyone's gonna see it. But you can post your new art piece or whatever in your [Instagram] stories."* Many participants (P3, P6, P12, P14, P19, P20, and P21) described relying on platform features such to subvert the platform demand for immediacy. Others would make sure their art was shared in multiple places. *"I'll try and like cross-post [to] Twitter and Tumblr pretty much immediately,"* P6 explained. This tactic worked well for many participants, and worked within the available platform features or drew on multiple platforms to ensure that friends and creative peers saw their artwork.

Another tactic that participants described, particularly those whose creative processes take time, was to rethink how they used the platforms in question. P2, a 21 year old animator, explained that making a single 2D animation for their friends could take upwards of 80 hours to produce, but it wasn't something they were willing to compromise on. Instead, P2 explained,

> "I use my Instagram to compile a lot of [my animations], less so for the numbers and more so when someone asks me what I make, I have a single place I can point them to and it's easy to pull up, it's easy to show them [...] it's less so the fact that it's online, and more so it's easy to access from my pocket."

Platform enshittification forwards the idea that a platform has to be shitty for it's userbase to use, but this tactic of using a social media platform in a way that goes against the normative model of how one would use the platform is a form of resistance. Instead of buying into the way the platform demands to be used, they focusing on finding other ways to use a platform that allowed them to skate above platform demands and focus on their art (P1, P2, P6, P10). P2 appropriated Instagram's photo and video galleries to serve a purpose for themselves that exists within the spirit of what Instagram's promise as an artists' platform. It is, however, not in the spirit of the current enshittified practice of Instagram's ad-clogged feed and AI-driven search [35, 55], instead eschewing any such affiliation. P6 and P10 have a similar practice on Twitter, with P6 explaining, *"I don't use reaction images on Twitter, because I know that they'll show up on my media feed. And my media feed is basically my gallery."* Again, eschewing affiliation with the enshittified practices of Twitter allows both P6 and P10 to use Twitter without being used by Twitter as well.

*4.3.2* **Letting Go of Platforms**. When it was not enough to use the platform in a way that suited our participant's needs, as opposed to the platform's demands, another strategy participants deployed was to vote with their feet and let go of platforms that were frustrating, challenging to use, or did not bring community that participants desired when sharing their art. P10, for example, expressed a sentiment echoed by several other participants (P1, P3, P9, P14, P17), that platform algorithms made her feel as though she had to follow a certain set of rules to share her art and have it be seen:

> "I don't know whatever the fucking algorithm does, on Twitter [or] even on Instagram. Like, sometimes your art just doesn't get as far as it used to. [There are] like so many invisible rules, like don't put too many hashtags, don't put any links, don't read, don't post any other art after you've posted the main art that you did."

When asked how she coped with this feeling, P10 explained, *"But it's just more like if these specific invisible rules weren't in place, this algorithm wasn't in place. It probably could do better. And that's not the fault of me and my art, that's the fault of the website itself."* Further, P10's discussion of how her art "doesn't get as far as it used to" speaks to a nostalgic time when she was able to achieve success even when contending with the invisible rules. P10's feeling of not being able to abide

by invisible rules that were unknown because they *could not* be known, participants described stepping away from platforms. P9 expressed similar sentiments:

> "I'm completely gonna step away from these platforms, I'm not gonna let these numbers or these results control my life, because it's literally something that I cannot control. Like, I can control what kind of [art] I put out, but I have no control over who will see it, how they will receive it [...] letting go of that kind of control, I found, helps me even though it's not an easy thing, and sometimes it's hard."

Introducing algorithmic curation into online spaces presented a challenge for many participants, as they were not in control over who saw their art or how their art was understood by the platforms where they shared it. Stepping away from troubling platforms was seen as a way of reclaiming their art from the platforms that were exploitative, or platforms where they felt they spent more time navigating the platform that taking joy out of the use of the platform from social connections and feedback on their artwork.

*4.3.3* **Centering Joyful Platforms and Experiences**. In rethinking platform use and letting go of platforms, the artists we spoke to were working to reclaim joy over their creative practice. Online, the edict is often to "curate your own experience." Surrounding oneself with good people, in a place where one feels comfortable, is key to finding joy in the little things. For the visual artists we spoke to, finding joy in their art came not from monetization, or through having the biggest audience possible, but rather from feeling comfortable in the spaces they choose to be in, and with the people they find there. P14 explained, *"Instagram is where only the polished stuff goes. Whereas Tumblr, I feel like I can share things that I consider like, bad, but I had fun drawing them."* P14's experience with Tumblr largely came from it being a comfortable place for her to share her art with friends without having to deal with the overhead of navigating Instagram. This sentiment was common, with many of the artists we spoke to focusing on the art that they found fun. P9 explained that they tend to not prioritize putting effort into ensuring that their art is visible on the social media accounts where they share it, but instead *"try to focus more on just the part that I really like, for example, this artwork I just did, I want to share with because it brings me joy, maybe it will bring some joy to other people, maybe they will like it."* By focusing on their joy in their use of various platforms, the artists we spoke to were able to circumvent many of the more unpleasant experiences they had on using enshittified online platforms to share their art. *"I think at this point in my life, the goal is to actually enjoy myself while I'm drawing,"* P12 explained when we discussed why she left Instagram. *"It was kind of like, well, why would I even bother posting on Instagram?"*

Other participants leaned on the social connections that their art allowed them to form with others to find and center their joy. P9, as quoted above, often hoped that people would see their art when they shared it, but other artists focused more on creating *for* other people. P18, a 54 year-old comic book storyteller, explained how he recenters his love for art and drawing when feeling burnt out:

> "I love drawing. I sometimes have to remind myself of that. I think I've achieved everything I've ever wanted to do in my professional life (except make tons of money), so just doing drawings for people that make them happy is a simple pleasure that I really enjoy."

While P18 drew for his friends, P22 focused her effort on showing others how she did her art, making art process videos that she knew they were not *"necessarily good for my art to be seen or for me to develop customers"*, but rather because it mattered to *"help other people know how to do things."* Repeatedly, participants talked about doing art and creative work for others, and for themselves. P6 described her internal drive: *"I need to get [my idea] out. I need to talk about it. I need to, you*

*know, draw it. [...] A lot of it's internal drive. It's just like, I need to do this. I need to see this, you know".* Being able to find joy through creation allowed the artists we spoke to circumvent the shitty experiences they were having on other platforms to focus, repeatedly, on the joy that being creative with and for other people, and drawing on that creative spark from within, allowed them to be.

## 5  Discussion

Our findings show that there is a clear trajectory of the enshittification of the creative internet. We consider the creative internet to be a network of platforms, creative people, and community where artists learn and grow with each other. Initially, the creative internet was a place to find and encounter creative community, but it changed quickly as platforms grew and platform policies changed. As platforms lock users into their content-driven business model, they then are free to get shittier, as Doctorow argues [22, 24]. However, the movement towards enshittification implies a time when the Internet was less shitty. Our results show that issues with these platforms that could be attributed to enshittification, while emergent over time, were always there for some users, but that these experiences must be understood on a case by case basis. When a person remembers what Instagram "used to be like" as well as what the platforms they used before Instagram were like, they are far better equipped to critique changes to a platform logics than someone who just signed up and is encountering the platform for the first time.

Platform logics, either through design, algorithms, or policy, pushed the artists in our study to adjust their creative processes and do additional creative labor to ensure their art could be easily translated, seen, and sold on social media. Prior work has found this practice to be creatively limiting [77] and potentially introduce additional steps in the creative process [74]. Yet the artists we spoke to kept sharing their art on these platforms, even as the platforms, as P22 so aptly put it, are "working against" their active user base because they don't want to miss out on what might be waiting for them as artists in these spaces [22]. For many of our participants, and for many using these platforms broadly, the drive to stay on these increasingly shitty platforms, or leave but still come back from time to time, stems from a fear of losing social connection with their fellow artists and friends. For some, when their livelihood is tied up in their use of particular platforms (e.g., Etsy with P22 or Instagram with P20), contending with enshittification and the urge to leave is even harder. Shifting platform policies on artist platforms like Instagram, Etsy, and Twitter have made the general experience worse for the artists who routinely draw on these infrastructures to share their work. Yet, artists remember the before times, and they focus on those when they're discussing the platforms.

In the sections that follow, we first highlight the relationship between nostalgia and enshittification to demonstrate how nostalgia for prior times and experiences is what keeps us on these platforms. Enshittification pushes platform users to accept and use a shittier version of a once-good (or at least better than what it is right now) platform, but it also *hides* how platform changes increasingly focus on commodification of users in pushing us to focus on that nostalgia. We then describe sociotechnical mechanisms that could be deployed to help creatives develop resilience in their creative practices more broadly.

### 5.1  Nostalgia & Enshittification on the Creative Internet

Enshittification is a concept that focuses on how the internet *gets bad* [23], but to operationalize enshittification in research, you need to first know what the internet was like before - and why people chose to get their art wrapped up in these platforms in the first place. There is another factor embedded into these questions as well: was the Internet ever really good—or was it a good place to share art—in the first place? For some of the artists we spoke to, that answer was clearly no, as they felt joined these platforms too late (P21 explained that she spent a significant amount

of time learning how to use Instagram, rather than simply sharing her art there), or never joined them at all (P16). But for a significant number of our research cohort, there was a clear "before" the shitty time on these platforms: a golden era where the platforms worked as expected, and allowed for social connections to form. For example, P1, P4, P6, P10, P12, P15 and P17 all joined DeviantArt *before* they branched off into other, more "social" media. People learned and grew as artists on DeviantArt, people made friends there. Platforms like DeviantArt, which persevered through the advent of social media, served as an introduction for many artists to the potential of an online world, and people remember that first "home".

Nostalgia blurs the edges of memory and forwards the good, rather than the bad, memories we have of a place. Nostalgia serves as a reason *why* people may adopt technologies and integrate them into their everyday routines [75]. Technology and its consumption play a role in the production of nostalgia [58], a person must use and consume an online platform to produce nostalgic feelings or to assign nostalgic feelings to a new "successor" online platform, such as Vine "evolving" into TikTok [75]. Artists are likely to continue sharing art on platforms they were initially drawn to when they are nostalgic about what the platform initially provided them with—a sense of community and belonging. Consider P12 or P22, both of whom clearly state that they did still use Instagram, but in the same breath explained that they regularly returned to Instagram to check up on social connections and artists they enjoyed. Nostalgia for that community keeps them returning to Instagram, even if they do not enjoy the enshittified version of Instagram they see when they return.

These platform technologies are adopted out of a sense of fondness for the past, but they continue to eschew being "tamed" [75]. Rather, they occupy a state of constant flux, where the user must carefully measure their engagement with the space to maintain their desired experience. Having to constantly contend with platform logics like algorithmic mediation of creative work is, in many ways, a suboptimal way to experience or use a platform that was adopted with the hopes of it continuing to perpetuate the same joys as other, fondly remembered internet spaces. When considering the creative internet, **enshittification pushes users to accept and use a simulacrum of what once was a good platform, while obscuring the fact that the platform's policies, governance structures, and design, have turned away from supporting its everyday users to focus instead on the commodification of those users**. As our findings show, nostalgia is what keeps the creative internet alive in the face of this enshittification, as nostalgia fosters a sense of collective identity and sociality [51, 56, 69]. The artists we spoke to were all using these platforms because of the people they were connected to through these spaces. They focused on their personal joy in doing art and doing art for themselves or other people, falling back on the human infrastructures of the creative internet that drew them to these spaces in the first place.

## 5.2 Towards Resilience: Designing Sociotechnical Infrastructures that Foster Human Connection

Artists and other crafts/tradespeople have, historically, always found their jobs on the chopping block in the ever-forward march of technological innovation and "progress" [2]. It is easy to take a photograph and capture something that it takes a painter months to capture accurately; it is easier still to automate the photographer's art using generative AI tools. Yet people still paint, and people still spend hours in the darkroom to get their photos just right. Given that the creative internet is shitty and people are fueled by nostalgia, this will not help propel all users of the creative Internet, why do people continue to do art when an easier, better replacement is always just around the corner? Why do people keep posting their art on DeviantArt if most of their positive interactions with fellow artists come from Reddit or Instagram (P18)?

Doctorow argues that it is a fear of missing out that keeps users on enshittified platforms [22], but our findings show that users come and go from various platforms with ease, but never leave the broader creative internet. Instead, artists move from platform to platform, chasing nostalgic feelings for prior platforms, creative communities, and positive user experiences; such as P4 following their friends from DeviantArt to Tumblr, and then eventually Discord. Our findings demonstrate how enshittification explains what is happening on the *platform side* of this age-old give-and-take between artists and those who have the power to ensure their art is seen. Artists point to it not being enough to focus exclusively on the platform side of what is going on as the internet gets shitty. "I do art for myself" and "I do art for my friends" were constant refrains during the conversations we had with artists. The fear of missing out is not isolated to a single platform on the creative internet, but rather a loose collection of platforms, community spaces, people, and modalities for sharing art online. Nostalgia for what once was a creative internet keeps people looking for new spaces, with recent moves away from social platforms like Twitter [44], Instagram [66], and Tumblr [59] to more niche or specific communities on Discord or Twitch. It is the art and the creative energy that binds these communities together, a collective set of values, rather than commitment to any one platform or modality. What does not go away is a connection to a community with shared values and creativity found across the space these platforms, together, produce.

So what is resilience in the face of this kind of enshittification? Resilience describes a person's ability to bounce back from threat or harm [71], and much of the harm caused by platform policy and governance came from shifting policies and constantly contending with algorithms that were constantly in flux and therefore impossible to integrate into routine use. Repeatedly, the artists we spoke to described doing art *for themselves or others*, meaning that simply not giving a shit about any of the platform's bullshit and using it, rather than being used by it, is a solid resilience strategy.

As designers of these online spaces, contending with the fact that a significant number of the users on a platform simply don't care about all the bells and whistles presents a new kind of design challenge, because it forces us to ask: **who are these features really for?** When each new design choice makes the platform worse, our findings demonstrate that people prioritize what works for them, rather than what works for the platform or the platform's bottom line.

Platforms depend on user-generated content to sustain themselves, as their users co-produce their platform experience [13, 81]. When user-generated content is produced for personal fulfillment, rather than the demands of an ever-hungry platform, the platform gets what they want, content, but from a disengaged user base that has no interest in playing the game or buying into the hype. Enshittified platforms are much the same in that the users of the platforms–the producers and consumers of the content that sustains them—are well aware that the platforms are circling the proverbial drain. While sometimes "influencer creep" happens [7], our findings show that users of these platforms are more likely to become frustrated, or refuse to play the game. Instead of trying to exist within or contend with the pitfalls of these platforms, artists we spoke to chose to focus on their own joy and creative purpose. Artists' small acts of resilience—prioritizing their joy and deprioritizing platform engagement metrics and other demands—demonstrates how the often adversarial relationship between creators and platform attains stasis. They used platforms, rather than be used by them. They're still engaged in these spaces, driven by nostalgia and human connection, but they're also disengaged and don't care about sustaining a presence on the platform. Conversations are taken to DMs, and then to Discord or texts, and suddenly these platforms are just places to put things.

Designing for this kind of resilience must come with careful consideration for what artists are contending with. Enshittification is a reality of these platforms. Every cool new thing that people try to integrate into their routine art sharing will eventually get shitty. And the thing is, people know this and plan for it. They follow each other on multiple platforms, they share phone

numbers, they meet offline. Nothing on the internet is permanent and the human connections that are formed are closely held. **As designers, fostering human connection should be the priority of every design decision made on these platforms.** And these design decisions must focus on that connection as it is understood by users, rather than what will keep people engaged and on the platform for hours at a time. If we can do this, we can stop the enshittification of platforms by shifting the focus from engagement to what digital social media was initially created to do: facilitate connection between people who might not otherwise have gotten the chance to meet.

## 6 Conclusion

In this paper we discussed the artistic journeys across the Creative Internet of 22 artists, and reflected on the experiences of artists using these spaces over time. While the features, policies, and infrastructures of the online platforms that make up the Creative Internet have certainly changed over the years that these artists have used these spaces, the human infrastructures of these platforms have sustained the presence of artists within these spaces. In our examination of nostalgia as it relates to enshittification, we found that the most nostalgic feelings that artists had toward platforms were around the communities they found there, rather than the features, that kept artists using enshittified platforms.

As the internet contracts and reshapes itself in the face of this new age of AI, enshittification is only going to get worse. Reddit, once known as the "front page of the internet," plans to roll out a paid subscription model later in 2025 [48], once again forwarding corporate profits over user desires.'AI slop'—low quality, inauthentic, or inaccurate content—is a byproduct of enshittification, but it is also contributing to the further enshittification of these online platforms [26, 47, 82], but its presence on platforms "doesn't matter," as Medium's CEO put it [47], so long as no one reads it. The problem is that people do read the slop and people do encounter the paywalls, because enshittification is impossible to get away from. Artists, other creatives, and anyone who routinely draws on the infrastructures of the Creative Internet for community and inspiration, must contend with enshittification constantly. As experts in the cooperative work that creates these resilient communities and the information and communication technologies that support them, we must work to find ways to resist enshittification through our research endeavors. Future work in this regard could explore user presence or departure on various platforms after unpopular platform policy decisions, potentially echoing the work of Fiesler and Dym [30] on transformative fandom though a lens of enshittification. All told, it is up to us as CSCW researchers to explore sociotechnical solutions to enshittification.

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