

Occupy Social Media Report: The DeviantArt Decline

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Introduction

Calling itself the largest online art gallery and community in the world, DeviantArt has long been an influential art monolith of the internet. Created by, Angelo Sotira, Scott Jarkoff, and Matthew Stephens in 2007, the platform grew from what was a desktop “skinning” platform into a multi-million dollar behemoth. (Wikimedia, 2024)

Known for its diverse and often controversial communities, the platform holds a special place in the hearts of many “deviants” who grew up with the site. In a video reflecting upon the “rise and fall” of DeviantArt, YouTuber Izzzyzzzz, an ex-user herself, recalls, “It genuinely touched countless lives and had a genuinely huge impact on the online art space” (Izzzyzzzz, 2023, 15:53-15:57). Indeed, DeviantArt was a staple of the early internet, but today, the platform is more obscure. As to what happened, many blame the design changes made in 2017. This so-called Eclipse update overhauled the UI of the platform, but through its scrutiny, users also drew attention to other flaws within the site. Indeed, due to the introduction of design changes, as well as inherent flaws with its algorithm, AI software, and commercialization features, DeviantArt is unable to create an adequate user experience, actively harming the platform’s online communities.

OLD-NEW: DESIGN CHANGES

To understand what went wrong with DeviantArt, it’s important to examine what made the platform effective. At its core, DeviantArt is a “peer production” platform, something that utilizes the “collaborative creation of an information good”. (Wallace, Jan 29, 2024, p.46) The site depends upon its users to “generate content”, which for DeviantArt is user art, and that this “User Generated Content” supersedes the value of individual profiles. (Wallace, Jan 29, 2024, p.46) Effectively, content is more important than the person, and we can see this through the history of the platform.

In an interview on ABC's *Future Tense* podcast, DeviantArt co-founder Angelo Sotira, discussed what made the platform successful, stating, "But the brand really connected with artists, for whatever reason, and I think it connected because deviation is very much at the heart of creativity, thinking about things differently, putting into your artwork something that makes it shine or something that's unique." (Davis, 2016). Essentially, Sotira attributed the platform's success to individuality, and he goes on to say that artists get better through "riffing" of off one another. (Davis, 2016) To capitalize on this, DeviantArt fostered individuality by creating communities of artists to "riff" off each other, and indeed, it's "peer production" model depends upon its users creating and sharing content communally. From a design perspective, this was achieved through an effective UX design.

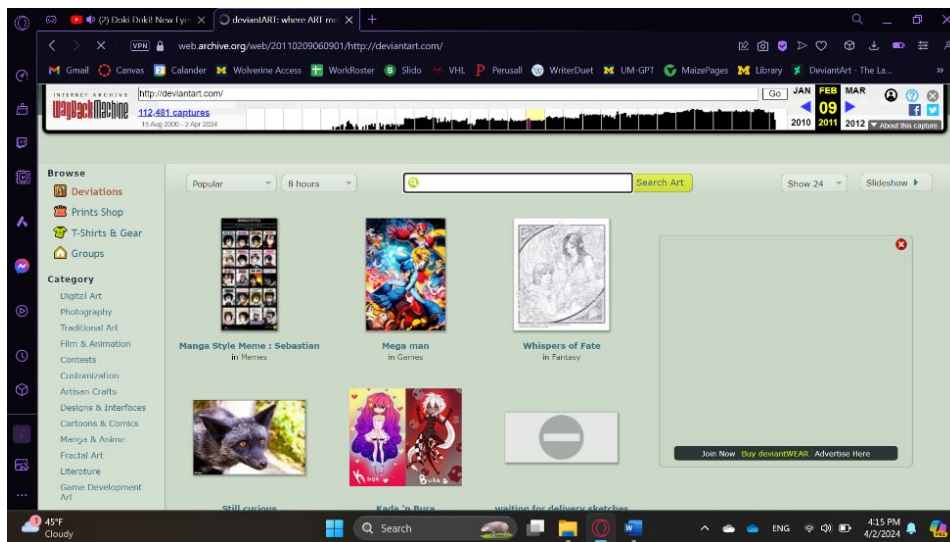


Figure 1: *DeviantArt homepage, 2011*

Figure 1 demonstrates an example of a typical homepage during the height of DeviantArt's success in 2011. One can notice a few key features: On the left side, we have a list of different art "categories", which when clicked upon takes the user to a community homepage following that "category". On the top, there is a search bar, as well as the "popular" feature allowing one to filter content. Finally, in the middle of the screen, there are individual posts, with each having a link to what "category" it's listed in.

While antiquated, the homepage followed one of Jakob Neilson’s esteemed “Ten Usability Heuristics for User Interface Design”, that being number 7, “Flexibility and Efficiency of Use”. This heuristic purports shortcuts, essentially, differing routes to speed up interaction on user interfaces. (Laubheimer, 2024) For DeviantArt, every feature was “Efficient” because it allowed one to find art but was “Flexible” in that it had multiple ways to do it. Both the “categories” tab and individual posts had ways of discovering the communities associated with them. Indeed, DeviantArt’s historic design supported the platforms’ goals by routing users to their communities at every step.

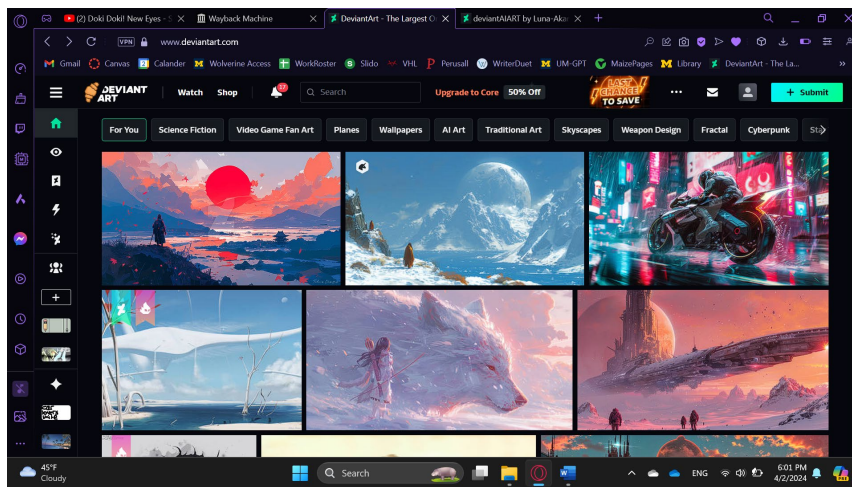


Figure 2: *DeviantArt homepage today. Post-Eclipse update*

Compared to Figure 1, The DeviantArt of today in Figure 2 is completely different. Losing its iconic green, DeviantArt opted for a crisp and generic black. The “categories” tab is gone but was replaced by a “groups” tab that forces one to search for a preexisting community. The homepage is still dominated by individual posts, admittedly losing their titles, but gaining their own “tags” section in the top center leading to individual “categories.” Indeed, while it retains many of the same features, DeviantArt feels like a different site, which when compared to contemporary platforms, is believable.

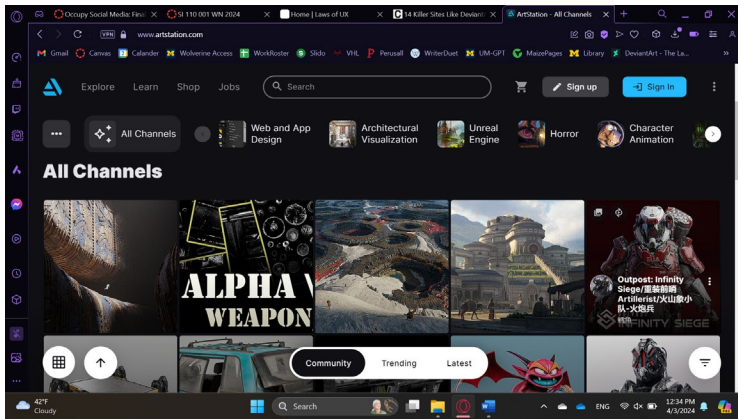


Figure 3: *ArtStation homepage.*

Figure 3 shows ArtStation, a competitor to DeviantArt, and through it, we can see striking similarities. With the same color, style, layout of posts and an identical “tags” section in the top center, DeviantArt is a replica of ArtStation. Why the platform would do this follows another one of Neilson’s design heuristics, known as Jakob's law, that reasons that since users spend time on other sites, they prefer to use products like the ones they already know. (Yablonski, 2024) With this logic, the new DeviantArt should be an improvement. Although tweaked, it retains most of the same base features that made it successful while overhauling the UI to be like other products. This was not the case though. Immediately after the design changes, there was a mass backlash on the site by its user base.

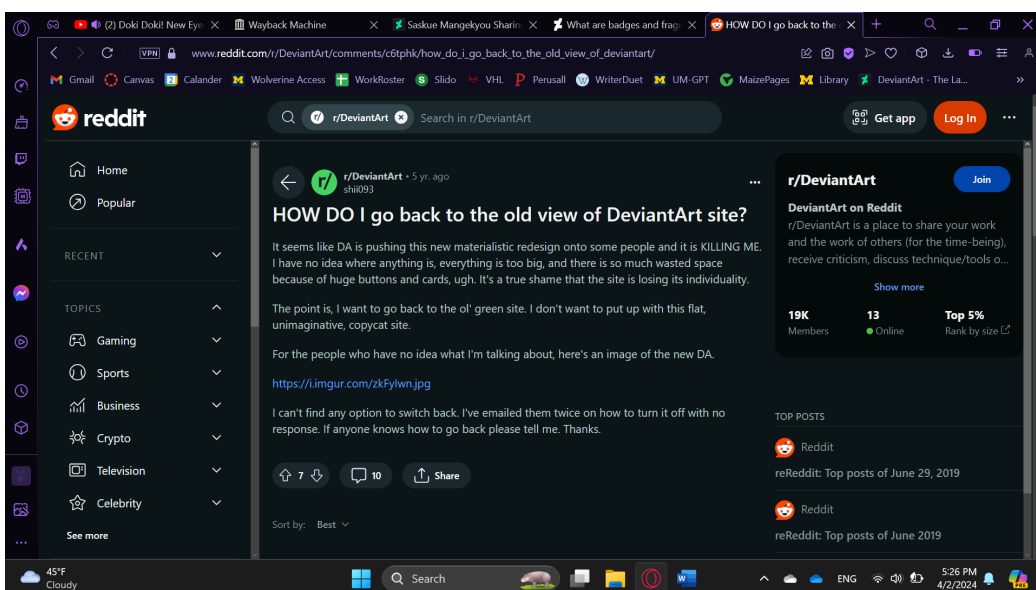


Figure 4: *Example of negative community feedback*

Figure 4 is an example of this backlash, which interestingly, claims DeviantArt's similarity to other sites as a weakness. Why? As figure four says, the changes hurt the very thing that made the platform popular in the first place: Individuality. DeviantArt's target audience is people who like to "deviate", making it illogical to think that standardization and uniformity would be effective on a user base built upon rebelliousness. Additionally, the new features introduced in the Eclipse update are shallow versions of their historic counterparts. The "tags" section at the top of Figure 2 is small in size and breadth of content compared to the detailed "categories" section underneath posts and in the "categories" section of Figure 1. This small size makes it hard and confusing to use and simply makes the user less inclined to explore it. Indeed, the problem with the "tags" section points to the overall problem with the update in that the UI itself is laid out contradictory to DeviantArt's strengths. While the old platform was designed to guide people to communities, the new one focuses on individual images. Like other social media, the new DeviantArt is an infinite stream of images designed to "scroll" through; while supplying its users with content, the platform has lost the accessible routes to communities that fostered engagement on the platform.

ALGORITHMIC PROBLEMS

Another struggle DeviantArt faces is problems with its Algorithm. For the platform, the algorithm is used to filter what content is shown to users. It does this by tracking the "tags" of content the user consumes, and subsequently showing them images with the same "tags". Upon first use though, the user has no history; DeviantArt therefore gives a list of popular tags, and the user selects what kind of content they wish to see.

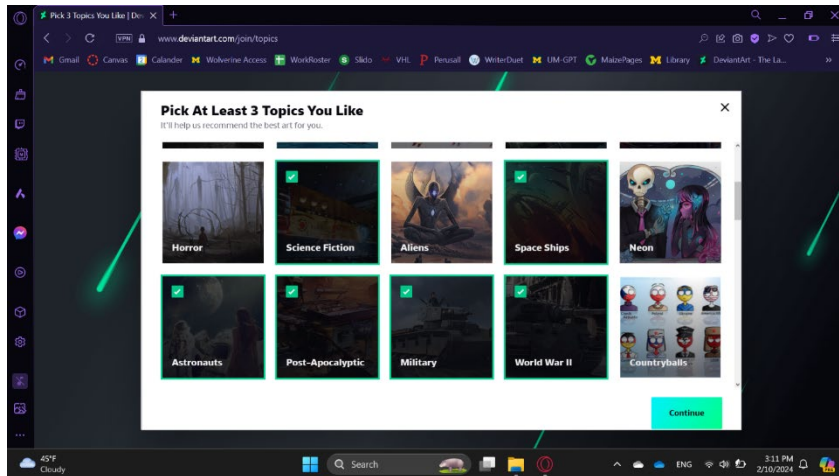


Figure 5: DeviantArt “tags” selection screen

Figure 5 gives an example of what the author of this paper initially chose as his prerequisites. He specifically made sure to choose extremely similar “tags” to increase the chances of the algorithm showing him desired content. The following figure is what kind of content is shown.

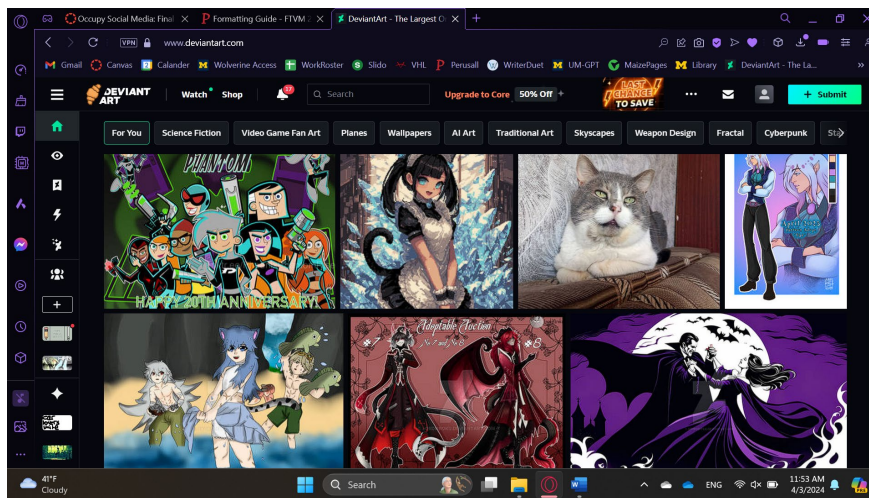


Figure 6: Author’s DeviantArt homepage

Indeed, figure six shows a variety of images unrelated to the tags chosen in Figure 5, and yet similar images dominate the DeviantArt home screen. Indeed, one of the problems of the algorithm is that it disregards chosen prerequisites, a flaw that has obvious implications for user experience; Users don’t have much control over what kinds of content are recommended to them, making it more difficult to find

desired art. This causes obvious frustration for the user, but more direly, hurts their ability to join communities. Dana Rotman and Philip Fei Wu in their chapter of *Sense of Community in Virtual Environments* define what makes a successful online community, stating, “However, an accepted and bounded domain of interest must exist in order to create and maintain a sense of community” (Leimeister, 2014, p.41). If users can’t find a “bounded domain of interest”, or put simply, the kind of content they like, they’re not going to create the communities vital for the enjoyment of the platform.

Algorithmic problems go further than an ability to select content, indeed, one of the most infamous problems with DeviantArt’s algorithm is what *kind* of content it selects. As best put by Angelo Sotira, “So fandom, fan art in general is extremely popular on the internet, and DeviantArt certainly reflects that.” (Davis, 2016), and indeed, DeviantArt is renowned for the proliferation of fanart. One can see this reflected in the content in Figure 6, which even when not selected, DeviantArt’s algorithm still pushed fanart onto the user. To gain a deeper analysis though, one can also compare the distribution of likes between fanart and non-fanart.

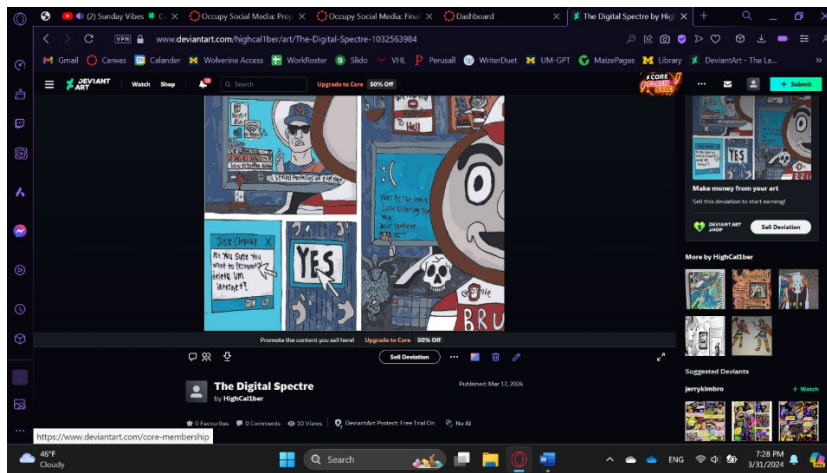


Figure 7: Original non-fanart post by the author

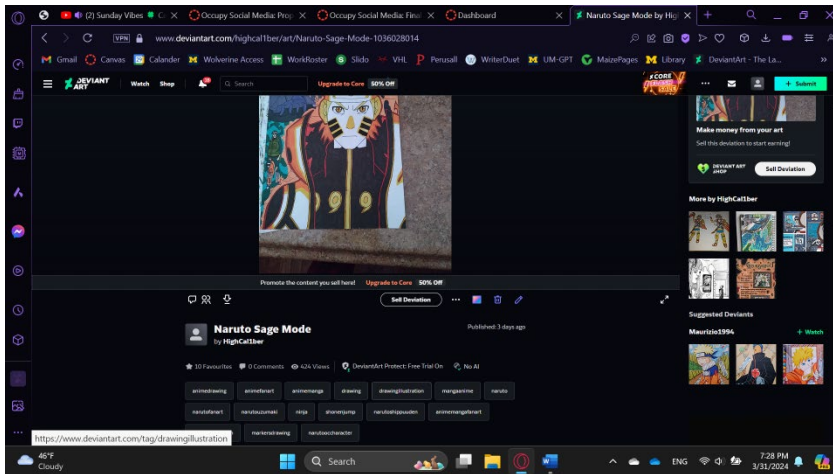


Figure 8: *Naruto Fanart post by the author*

Comparing these two works, one can see that Figure 8 has significantly more “likes” than Figure 7. Both use the same art style and were drawn with the same skill level by the author, yet it’s interesting that even though Figure 7 was posted 14 days earlier, thus, giving more time to garner “likes.”, Figure 8 was able to get 42 times as many in only 3 days. From what’s presented, it seems Sotira stands corrected that DeviantArt reflects fanart’s popularity.

Where this harms the site is that it harms the diversity of the platform. Since only one art form gets the majority of the “swing” with the algorithm, DeviantArt alienates original content. For those interested in this type of content, DeviantArt can make it harder to consume, which like before, leads to a frustrating and unenjoyable user experience. One should also remember Rotman and Wu’s point that users need “an accepted and bounded domain of interest...” (Leimeister, 2014, p.41) to form communities. Once again, those uninterested in fandom will have difficulty finding it, making it harder to form meaningful communities on the platform.

AI ART

Another one of the plagues affecting DeviantArt is the controversy around AI Art. Since its introduction, DeviantArt users have protested its existence; Figure 8 gives an example of one of the more popular trends: Uniform posts with the letters AI crossed out to show solidarity. The reader should notice

just how many likes and favorites it has, 486,000 and 3,400 respectively; These are extraordinary numbers for DeviantArt and show just how seriously the community takes the issue.

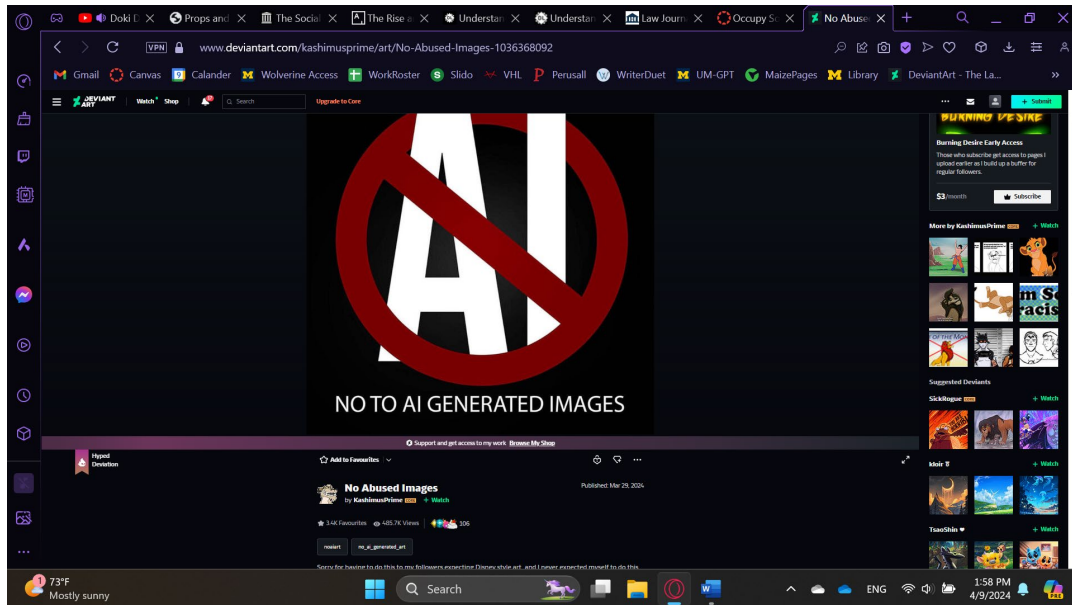


Figure 9: *A popular trend on DeviantArt. Anti-AI art posts*

Users cite a multitude of grievances against AI, which readers have inadvertently already experienced. Indeed, returning to both Figures 2 and 5, one can notice how the content on these pages have a striking similarity in style; They have a “plastic” kind of matte luster, with striking colors and an almost ethereal nature. These are AI-generated posts, and it should be noted they cover the entire screen of both figures. Indeed, if one uses the platform at all, it’s almost guaranteed the user will be bombarded with this content: the first of the grievances users have with AI.

Why does this occur? To investigate, the author of this paper explored the AI art creation feature by creating his own. To do some, one must submit a short prompt; within 30 seconds, three digital images appear.

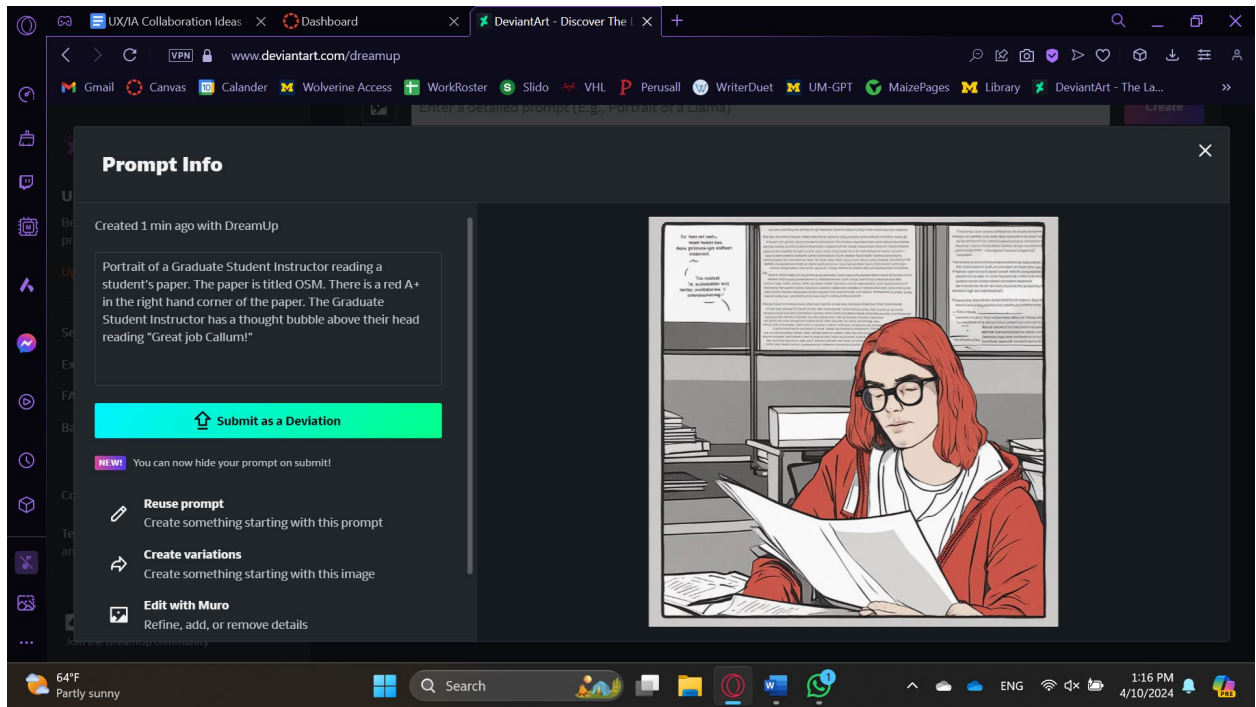


Figure 10: *Digital image generated by author.*

Indeed, the AI art feature is easy, quick, and generates decently high images. The speed and effectiveness of this process create the problem; Users flood the platform with AI art because it's an easy way to get views and bolster one's profile. It's a way to game the system, and in an attempt to mitigate the problem, DeviantArt introduced a feature that lets one eliminate AI from the browsing experience. Using it creates a lens to view the scope of the issue.

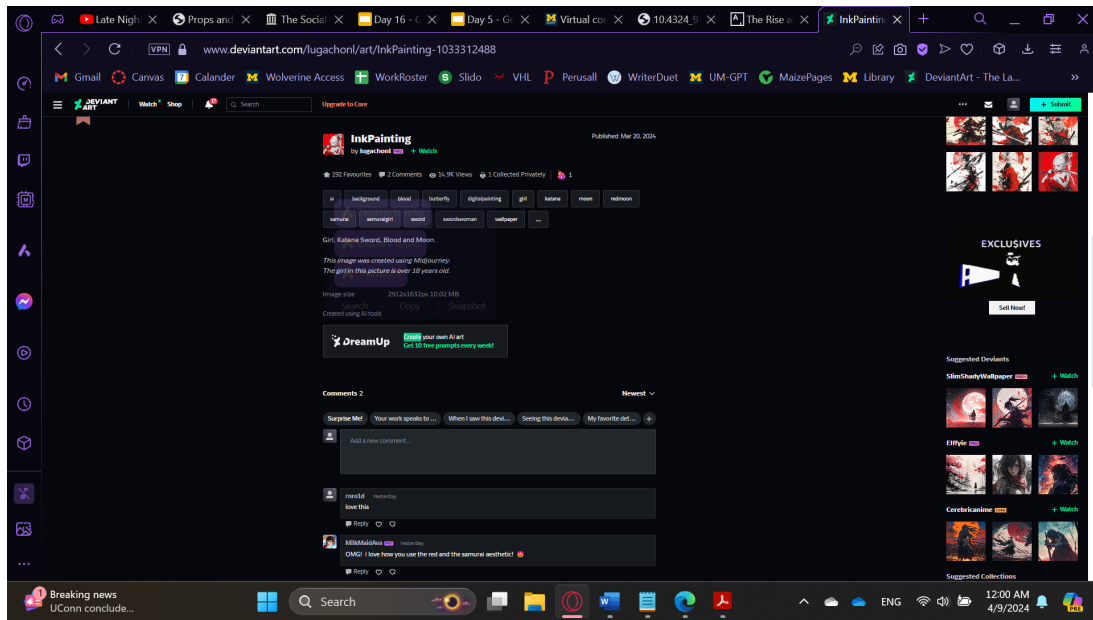


Figure 10: Top of “With AI” art page.

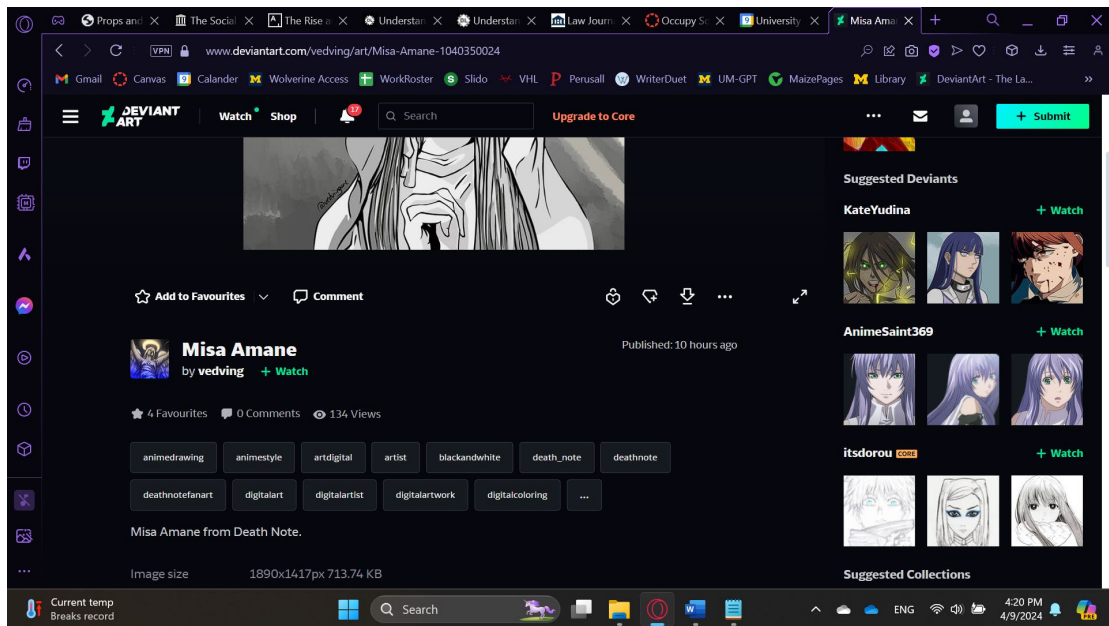


Figure 11: Top of the “non-AI” art page

Comparing both figures, it’s evident that the AI art in Figure 10 has significantly more views than non-AI art. Indeed, Artists can’t keep up with the speed and sheer volume of AI posts, which bury their handmade work deep in the site. Not only is this discouraging to the artist, who loses incentive to post

works that won't be seen but fills users' feeds with noticeably fake and interchangeable content. Indeed, user experience is deeply impacted by AI stealing engagement, with the community being suffocated by the infinite stream of AI art. What once was a platform dedicated to artists trying to "riff off" each other has turned into an attention competition. One should notice how even though Figure 10 has 14,000 views, it only has two comments. This is the stereotypical lack of engagement in AI posts, which continues to kill the communities built on DeviantArt.

Not only does AI art steal engagement, but there is also controversy around how it gets its "art style". A group of artists filed a class action lawsuit against a multitude of AI Art companies, DeviantArt included those who, allegedly, "Violated the rights of millions of artists" by using art created by their users to train its AI. (*Andersen v. Stability Ai Ltd.*, 2023).). The plaintiffs claim the platforms took this content without, the "consent of artists and without compensating any of those artists." (*Andersen v. Stability Ai Ltd.*, 2023).) calling into question the role of Intellectual Property in the digital space.

The United States Constitution addresses the protection of intellectual property in its *Copywrite Clause*, which claims, "To promote the Progress of Science and useful Arts, by *securing for limited Times* to Authors and Inventors the *exclusive Right* to their respective Writings and Discoveries." (Wallace, Mar 14, 2024, p.77). Indeed, this protection promoting "the progress of Science and useful Arts" is an insurance policy for creators, ensuring they can create freely without infringement from other parties. In the case of DeviantArt artists, their "exclusive right" should apply to the works they create, yet "works generated by AI Image Products "in the style" of a particular artist are already sold on the internet, siphoning commissions from the artists themselves." (*Andersen v. Stability Ai Ltd.*, 2023). Users, once again, lose the incentive to use art platforms when their content is being weaponized against them. If artists cannot succeed because AI Art is eliminating their place on the platform, DeviantArt's users will continue to be dissatisfied and even shrink, destroying communities and creating a holistically bad experience for everyone on the platform.

COMMERCIALIZATION

Like all businesses, social media sites must make money; Considering DeviantArt doesn't utilize advertisements, its creators chose a subscription-based model. They called it Core Membership, and as explained in lecture 16, subscription-based models give their users a free base product. Through the purchase of the membership, the platform can be upgraded to a full version (Tata, 2024, p.27). This might sound generous; DeviantArt allows its users to experience the platform, giving them time to develop a liking to it, and ideally, use the site more. As they're integrated more into the community, they'll want more features of the site, making them want to purchase the membership. In theory, both DeviantArt users and developers get what they want. In reality, the commercialization of DeviantArt weakens the platform.

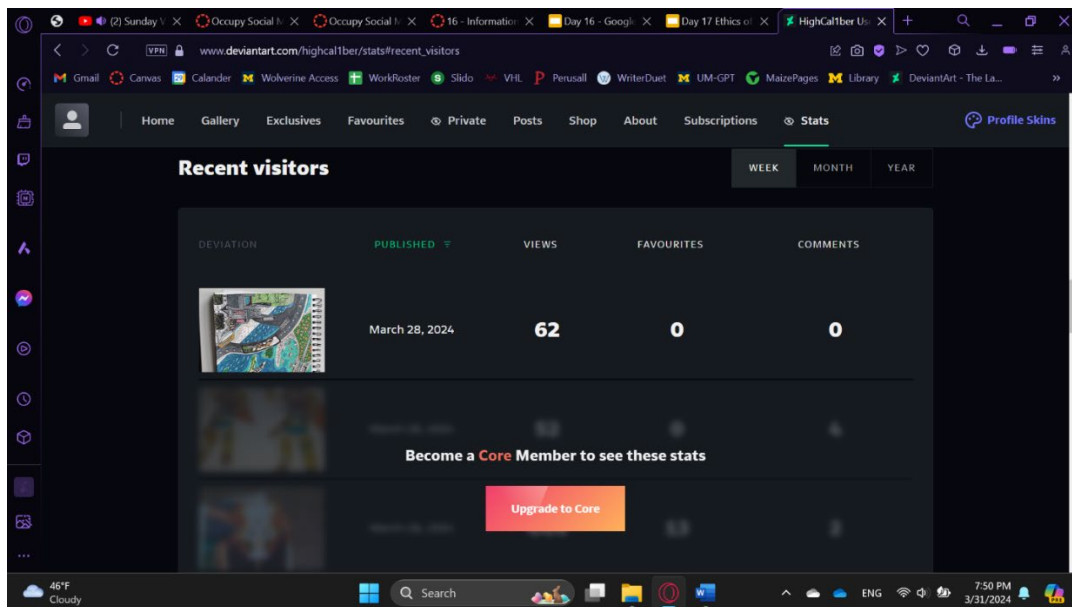
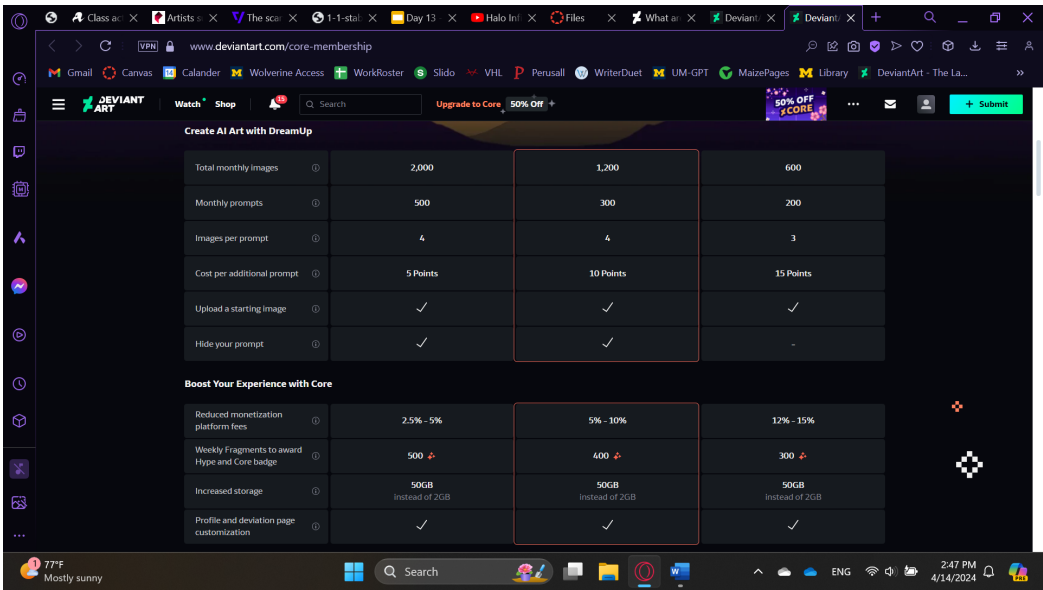


Figure 12: *Statistics Page, DeviantArt*



The screenshot shows the DeviantArt Core Membership page. It features a comparison table with three columns representing different membership levels. The first column lists features, and the subsequent columns show the corresponding values for each level. The features include AI art creation limits, monetization fees, storage, and profile customization. The table is titled 'Create AI Art with DreamUp' and 'Boost Your Experience with Core'.

Feature	Level 1	Level 2	Level 3
Create AI Art with DreamUp			
Total monthly images	2,000	1,200	600
Monthly prompts	500	300	200
Images per prompt	4	4	3
Cost per additional prompt	5 Points	10 Points	15 Points
Upload a starting image	✓	✓	✓
Hide your prompt	✓	✓	-
Boost Your Experience with Core			
Reduced monetization platform fees	2.5% - 5%	5% - 10%	12% - 15%
Weekly Fragments to award Hype and Core badge	500	400	300
Increased storage	50GB Instead of 2GB	50GB Instead of 2GB	50GB Instead of 2GB
Profile and deviation page customization	✓	✓	✓

Figure 13: *Features of Core Membership*

This is because, at a fundamental level, many of the features required for success on DeviantArt are locked by Core Membership. For example, Figure 12 demonstrates how one’s statistics are locked behind A Core Membership paywall. Statistics are a necessary tool for Artists to gain information used to grow their platform; Indeed, looking at the other features Core provides, they all are used to help artists grow. Figure 13 shows that Core Membership is necessary to use the AI art feature, which as previously mentioned, is a tool used to greatly increase one’s presence on the site. Another is “profile and deviation page customization.”, which one can remember, fosters the individuality that helped grow the site in the past.

While it’s possible to browse and post art without Core Membership, the real soul of the site can’t be accessed without it. Paywalls by themselves hinder user engagement, which a study in the American Marketing Association’s Journal of Marketing explains, stating, “First, the results suggest that monetization of online content, especially in the form of metered paywalls, might suppress usage among loyal consumers.” (Pattabhiraiah, 10). A paywall removing core features of the site only gives users more reasons not to use it. Indeed, commercialization ruins the spirit of the platform. Its increased efforts

to monetize and modernize drive users away and make for an altogether less creative experience. The communities of old can't gain enough traction to form if they can't access features to grow.

The lessons taught by DeviantArt's successes and failures shed light on how inextricably tied platforms are to their users and communities. Its past shows how good UX design can support the goals and strengths of platforms, allowing them to take on unique identities and build a following. Its current state gives insight into how design choices can negatively impact success, squashing users, and their communities. Technological features like Algorithms or AI can sometimes remove individuality and originality, while commercialization can push users away from engagement. Examining all these different aspects of DeviantArt, it seems that in each case, DeviantArt failed because it strayed away from what made it special in the first place. Modernization destroyed its community and user experience and it's a shame that the once "largest online art gallery" experienced such a fall from grace. Still, through DeviantArt's example, upcoming platforms should keep in mind just how important it is to create features that support its goals and nurture its users.

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