

The Community as Artist: The Show with Ze Frank
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< clip: The Show with Ze Frank episode "worst ever" (11/10/06)
<http://www.zefrank.com/theshow/archives/2006/10/101106.html> >

The videoblog series called *The Show with Ze Frank* was the work of one person, an artist, musician, and designer from Brooklyn. Ze Frank would conceive, perform, record, edit, and upload the daily videos himself, and he did not have the luxury of a cast or crew or any other support personnel. But his internet show also attracted a large and loyal following of fans who became integral to its creation, so to suggest that he was entirely alone actually misses half the story. In our age of participatory culture this fan collaboration might seem merely typical. To an extent, the fan involvement in *The Show* is of a piece with established conventions of fandom as they have grown around narratives in various media. But both the kind and degree of audience involvement in *The Show* is different from that of major media productions like Harry Potter. Because of the affordances of web-based media, the community that grew around *The Show with Ze Frank* was more collaborative and became integrated into the primary text as opposed to forming a secondary body of fan productions like short stories or mashups. *The Show* adopted some of the basic features of participatory fandom to make them into essential features of the primary text. Hence the title of my paper today: with *The Show*, the community functions not by appropriating, interpreting, or re-circulating a pre-existing text, but as a partner in artistic creation of the original. *The Show*, Frank says, takes the form of a conversation between the host and the audience—we see this in the clip I showed, as Frank responds to his fan's intro and answers a viewer's question. This kind of conversation exploits the internet's architecture of participation.

The Show with Ze Frank appeared in the late afternoon, Monday through Friday, from March 2006 to March 2007. Typical episodes were about three minutes long. They would begin with a brief introduction: often, "Good afternoon Sports Racers, you're watching *The Show With Ze Frank*." At first, Frank himself delivered this line but during the late summer, he began using clips of his fans ("sportsracers") introducing him, which they would record on their own cameras and upload to his website. Episodes would end with an even briefer conclusion, usually some variation on the tagline "This is Ze Frank, thinking so you don't have to."

Although they were quite short, episodes typically addressed more than one idea. Frank might discuss topical issues like the Iraq War with a questioning or satiric tone as in the genre of "fake news," and would answer viewers's comments in a regular segment, "S-s-s-s-something from the comments." As in this segment, much of *The Show* was made up of Ze's interactions with his viewers. He started contests for them to take part in. They initiated projects like making an "earth sandwich" by placing two pieces of bread on exactly opposite ends of the globe and passing a "human baton," a student who traveled from Oregon to New York and back using volunteer transport provided by sportsracers. Viewers collaborated against Frank in chess; they plotted their moves in their discussion forum and he gave his during episodes of *The Show*. At one point an upper echelon of sportsracers, known as the *fabulosos*, scripted an entire episode collaboratively on a wiki and Frank performed it to the letter and in its entirety.

The experience of *The Show* for many viewers may be casual or passionate; for many it offered an immersion in a dense network of shared references and interactive community. Some viewers might watch using iTunes or another video aggregation tool, but the optimal viewing situation was at zefrank.com/theshow, where the video frame at screen center is flanked left and right with inward links to pages in Frank's website. In addition to an "about" page and links to popular episodes, there are numerous opportunities for participation. One can join discussions in a forum, read about or build up site-related knowledge in a wiki (e.g., by transcribing episodes), and view or post photos, sound recordings, or videos to galleries, which may end up in episodes of *The Show*. There are links to pages offering *The Show* merchandise (ringtones, t-shirts--designed by sportsracers) and to a donations page where viewers could sponsor an episode of *The Show* with a custom message. The Ze Frank fan community also has a social networking site called the ORG with thousands of members. Casual viewers might watch the daily video and be satisfied with that, but many avid enthusiasts would invest more of their time and energy --to be rewarded with social bonds forged with other sportsracers and occasionally with a mention onscreen by Ze or even an appearance on the show, for instance in an intro in which a fan becomes Ed to Ze's Johnnie, announcing: "You're watching *The Show with Ze Frank*." Frank frequently composed and recorded songs for the show, and he encouraged his fans to remix them; these fan recordings might also appear in an episode.

Ze Frank began doing online video with a web page called "How to Dance Properly" (<http://www.zefrank.com/invite/swfs/index2.html>), a combination of several shots he took of himself dancing. He posted this as birthday party invitation to send to his friends. It became a "viral" sensation when his friends forwarded the video to others, and they in turn passed it along until, after a few days, it had been viewed by a huge number of strangers. In other words, a personal, amateur media product reached a mass audience almost effortlessly. Over the few years after that, he built up [zefrank.com](http://www.zefrank.com), a website filled with similar oddities, games, clips, and songs for his serendipitously assembled following. He became a popular web artist whose *métier* was creating brief, fun diversions. The modest audience for these ephemera followed him to *The Show*.

Within a short time after *The Show* debuted, it had attracted a following of viewers, many of whom had a more-than-casual interest. Frank encouraged his fans to participate by naming them sportsracers and by encouraging them to upload videos of themselves doing quasi-martial arts poses called "power moves," some of which were included in episodes. Riffing on a quote from a presidential spokesperson, Frank dubbed the enemies of sportsracers "hard chargers" and spoke out against them to encourage the audience's opposition. An especially active cadre of sportsracers were tagged "fabulosos" and they participated in more elaborate projects like *fabuloso chess*, which they played against Ze (they plotted strategy in the forum and he gave his moves during episodes), and *Fabuloso Fridays*, which were the viewer-scripted episode and segments of *The Show*. All of these supporters were seen as potential members of the somewhat mysterious League of Awesomeness, or LOA, and Frank later revealed that his year-long project of making *The Show* was actually an internship required by the LOA.

From early on, Frank encouraged his audience to see itself as a tight-knit group with its own language, iconography, and rites. After revealing his love of duckies, the yellow duck became Frank's mascot and eventually appeared at the top of the screen on *The Show's* main page and as the icon in the center of sportsracers t-shirts. The LOA mascot was an eagle, and it too became an icon to represent *The Show*. Frank cultivated a sense of the audience as an in-group with segments to open an episode designed to alienate new viewers who would not be hip to the *The Show's* insider knowledge. After a deliberately inane, slow-paced segment about the steps of his Brooklyn neighborhood, Frank looked into the camera, said, "Are the new viewers gone yet?", and proceeded with the normal, fast-paced delivery of his typical material.

< clip: *The Show with Ze Frank* episode "new viewer, , sexually transmitted diseases, lying, polygraph, snow, dogs, iran, oil" (4/26/06) <http://www.zefrank.com/theshow/archives/2006/04/042606.html> >

After several of these "Are the new viewers gone yet?" episodes, Frank did an entire show of absurd content called "Fingers in Food," in which he cheerfully inserted his digits into fruits, vegetables, and other comestibles. The following day's episode began, "Are the new viewers gone yet?" Early in the run of *The Show*, Frank encouraged viewers to dress up their vacuum cleaners, saying this was necessary for membership in the League of Awesomeness, and viewers posted their photos to the gallery. Frank would often talk politics and in one early show he picked up on a bumbling phrase President Bush used in answering an awkward question, "Yes No I This Is." Frank set these words to music and in subsequent episodes included this nonsense line in a way that would appeal to regular watchers and confuse newcomers. So many of these in-group items accumulated that only a few months along, he was able to compose a song called "Summer Jamz" to include them all as a way of disingenuously introducing *The Show* to new viewers, who would surely be more confused after hearing the song than before (<http://www.zefrank.com/theshow/archives/2006/05/053006.html>). Like kids in high school or summer camp, Ze and his sportsracers invented an essentially nonsensical lexicon of shared terms—inside jokes—to function as bonding slogans and foster in-groupness. This language and iconography that grew around *The Show* functions similarly to that of commercial media fandom. Phrases like the episode sign-off "Thinking so you don't have to" are like "May the force be with you." A power move is like a light sabre pose. A duckie is like a Darth Vader mask. The line "good afternoon sportsracers, you're watching *The Show with Ze Frank*" is like "a long time ago in a galaxy far far away."

The Show with Ze Frank thus adopted some of the same features as any fan-friendly media text. But one significant difference between the affordances of traditional audiovisual media and episodic internet video is that the eager, passionate viewer can become a participant not just in the practices of fandom, creating texts that draw upon the original, but in the creation of the primary text. Instances in which feature films have incorporated fan input, such as *Snakes on a Plane*, have done so in a much more limited fashion. The affordances of the web permit users' content to be integrated into the

primary product such as their songs and videos in a way that would be far less likely to happen in conventional, traditional forms. In the case of industrial media that engage with ordinary people's creative work, like *America's Funniest Home Videos*, there is a stark asymmetry in power and resources between producers and participants. This is seen, for instance, in the difference between production values of the home video and the professional studio shoot, and more significantly in the power the primary text has to define the meanings of the user-submitted clips by shaping their placement in the context of the segments in which they appear, by altering them from their original form, by adding sound effects and voice-overs. *The Show* offers a more egalitarian relationship between primary and secondary creative personnel. In effect, the secondary personnel are less secondary. They do more than contribute bits and pieces and ask questions as prompts for humorous bits, as TV viewers have long done. Viewers of *The Show* initiate projects and did real creative work, writing, composing, recording, videotaping, editing, and so on.

In contrast to the industrial setting in which "old" audiovisual mass media are made, web videos are products of an artisanal organization of labor and capital. The conditions of web video production are more like *ateliers* than like American movie studios with their stratospheric budgets and extensive division of labor. While the major media industries are quickly getting into the business of production for the web, the prototypical video online as of today is still the amateur video. Amateurs have access to less and different technology and personnel than professionals, and to significantly smaller sums of cash. These are crucial differences. Amateur can be defined three ways: one who pursues a passion for personal pleasure; who lacks the knowledge or means to produce professional-quality work; or who toils without expectation of pay. Many YouTubers are amateurs in all senses as are *The Show's* fan-participants, but the creators like Frank who do realize some advertising and viewer-donation income from their videos are amateurs in the other senses. Those who might have some production expertise still seem to prefer an amateur aesthetic with noisy sound, over or underexposure, crude editing, and other stylistic indicators of authentic DIY expression. Few videoblogs have anything resembling the look or sound of a local news program or network sit-com. Just as punk is opposed to the polish of pop, web video is opposed to the gloss and sheen of Hollywood entertainment. That sense of opposition is the spirit and ethos of DIY (do-it-yourself) production whether in music, publishing, or audiovisual media. As Frank describes it in one episode, videoblogging is "a cheap and fast alternative to making media—that looks cheap and fast."

The Show was created using the same tools that anyone who watches it might have: an old camcorder and the software that comes bundled in new Macintosh computers, iMovie for video editing and Garageband for sound recording and editing. Using the same tools that everyone has at their disposal adds value to Frank's videoblog because it suggests that Ze is just like us fans. Rather than a purveyor of traditional, professional mass culture, he is part of our community. A technological and economic constraint, having limited means, is turned into an aesthetic advantage in *The Show* and many videos like it. *Lonelygirl15* attracted its substantial following by duplicating the most important qualities of amateur video: spontaneous and casual performance and authentic bedroom *mise en scène*. Its downfall was that, among other giveaways, its use of fill lighting betrayed that it was too "pro" and so YouTubers began to question its legitimacy as amateur. Producers and consumers of web video, like zinesters and punk rockers, take a rough aesthetic to be a mark of credibility and virtue and they became suspicious when *lonelygirl* seemed too good.

Indeed, Ze Frank champions average, ordinary creative production by people without technical skill or training. In defending his "Ugly MySpace Contest" in which viewers of *The Show* nominated and voted on a slate of hideous user-designed MySpace pages, Frank celebrates "ugly" as a rebellion against proper taste and professional design orthodoxy. He argues that with ordinary people using media authoring tools that were previously reserved for professionals, canons of taste and beauty will have to be revised in accordance with the new inclusive mode of creativity and participation in culture.

< clip: The Show with Ze Frank episode "ugly, designers, myspace, ugly, ugly song, mushy peas, momma, happy birthday becky" (7/14/06)
<http://www.zefrank.com/theshow/archives/2006/07/071406.html> >

Ugly is not an anti-aesthetic, not a rejection of taste or beauty; it is a counter-aesthetic, a substitution of amateur standards for professional ones. This meshes with the technical design of *The Show*. As a video creator, Frank is not unlike a MySpace user who rejects good design in favor of doing his own thing. For instance, he seems totally innocent of professional editing technique and his framing of his own face can be uncomfortably close. Although he doesn't explicitly refer to himself in this episode of *The Show*, Frank seems to be describing his own aesthetic, his preference to take the tools of media

creation and see what he can do with them if he plays around. By the standards of Hollywood, *The Show* is certainly Ugly. But by the standards of the DIY movement, it is original, authentic, and worthwhile. Perhaps most importantly, Ze Frank's amateur approach puts little aesthetic distance between himself and his fan-participants.

DIY media is engendering a shift in popular taste. No longer is professionalism assumed to be the norm and standard of quality. The notion that do-it-yourself amateurism can stand on equal ground with media industry professionalism signals a democratic challenge to hierarchies of aesthetic value. And at the same time that amateur media is gaining ground, so is the communitarian alternative to traditional, top-down mass media distinctions between production and reception. Communities like the one that came together around *The Show* comprise artists working in a *vernacular* format of creative expression, using DIY tools and idioms. Art is always the product of a network of cooperation, but artists and their support personnel have traditionally been seen to occupy separate spheres. Our contemporary mediascape threatens this notion of the autonomy of the solitary artist, revealing ways in which creative communities can function as increasingly egalitarian networks.