

Tumblng Part 2: Archives Edition, or, Tracking Tumblr’s Genre Evolution Over the Years

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Stinnett delves into the depths of her Tumblr archives to analyze the ways in which Tumblr’s activity system and communication among users have evolved since Shelby Ragan’s 2015 analysis.

Ever since I first joined Tumblr in 2011, I have found the site fascinating. As a blogging platform, it is certainly one of a kind. If you want to make a post on Tumblr, you are not limited to just text posts—you can compose via photo, video, chat, link, and audio. Users will often combine different types of posts in order to create content. The site also emphasizes a more social twist on blogging—because of the ability to “reblog” another person’s post and add your own commentary, a post on Tumblr usually showcases interaction between bloggers. The multimodal and collaborative nature of the site makes it a truly unique form of composition. Given my fondness for the site, I naturally found myself drawn to Shelby Ragan’s article, “Tumblng Through Social Media: Exploring the Conventions of a Tumblr Blog” in issue 5.2 of the *Grassroots Writing Research Journal*. In her article, Ragan discusses how she applied writing research to a real-life context by observing how composition works on Tumblr and applying this knowledge to her own posts.

While reading about her experience with learning the sometimes-confusing conventions of Tumblr, I thought about my own experience joining Tumblr and how different things were when I joined versus when she joined. Although the basic conventions were still there, it was almost as though we

had each entered into a vastly different website. What truly blew my mind was how much *more* the website has changed since Ragan conducted her research in 2013. In just three years, Tumblr has gone through multiple cosmetic changes and has added and removed several features. Some features were given a complete remodel, adding not only improved functionality, but new tools to play around with when making a post. I started to wonder what may have caused these changes, and how they may have affected Tumblr as an activity system by changing the ways users can interact with each other. I decided that the best way to see these changes happening “in action” was to take a look at my own blog archive and conduct an “updated” genre analysis to see if I could track Tumblr’s **genre evolution**.¹ Through this analysis, I found that there were not only drastic changes in the site’s features and how members used these features, but changes in “acceptable” communication. These changes in “acceptable” communication often led to even more changes in the site’s features. What was so cool about researching the changes in this genre is that I got to see so many changes that I had barely noticed when they actually happened. I realized just how much power we have over certain genre conventions, and how skilled we are at adapting to evolving genres.

I originally joined Tumblr because I wanted to improve my writing, and I thought that blogging would be a good way to get some practice. All of my friends had a Tumblr account, so I figured I would join in on the fun and use Tumblr as my blogging platform. I used the website strictly as a place to write about my life, which reflected itself in the archive. When I jumped back to February 2011, I was shocked by the immediate difference that I could see in my blog based on the archive alone. My current archive is filled with pictures, GIFs, and short, humorous text posts, and I have been posting more often. However, in the first month of my blog, I only had four posts, and they were all longer posts about whatever was happening in my life. There was little to no interaction with these posts, as I had yet to establish any sort of “following.” I even included a title and a “signature” on all of the posts, which is especially foreign to how I currently use Tumblr. At first, I thought that I must have been an anomaly amongst other Tumblr users, so I decided to take a look at my friends’ archives to see how they were using the site at the time. I was surprised to see that, even though their archives were more **multimodal**² than mine, they were all still regularly posting long original posts. So, it appears that lengthy personal blog posts were still accepted as a use of the site back then.

This is a stark contrast to how Tumblr functions currently. Even though people still make the occasional personal post, everyone mostly “reblogs”

¹Genre evolution refers to the ways in which genres change over time as a response to their social, cultural, and rhetorical contexts.

²When a piece of composition is multimodal, it means that it uses many “modes” of communication. In Tumblr’s case, much of the composition is both written and visual.



Figure 1: A screenshot of a long thread on Tumblr—the urls represent users who have reblogged the post and added either a reaction GIF or “WOW” as commentary.

content. When someone does make an original post, it is often a very short quip about something that happened that day. These posts never have a title or a “signature” from the author, and will very rarely include tags. In fact, people seem to value the anonymity that Ragan discusses in her article even more three years later. It is rare to find a tagged original post—people value their privacy so much that they do not want their posts to be found in a tag. In the earlier days of Tumblr, people seemed obsessed with gaining as many followers as possible and producing viral content. Now, people would rather have a small audience and view viral posts as an annoyance since all of the notifications from a post tend to clog up the “activity” page. I remember feeling a little disheartened when no one interacted with my first few posts on Tumblr—nowadays I would be thankful for this lack of interaction! Many people have even asked Tumblr to add the option to make your blog “private.” Currently, all blogs are public by default, but many users would prefer to have their blog function as more of a social media profile where users can decide what content is public and private.

When I looked at the next two months on my archive, I could tell that I had started to dive into the **multimedia**³ aspect of blogging. My long blog posts were punctuated by funny pictures I reblogged from friends. What I found interesting about this stage of blogging is that when I clicked on the preview to see the full post, I noticed a long train of comments underneath the photo (see Figure 1). The comments did not necessarily add any sort

³Multimedia, as opposed to multimodal, refers to the various forms of media that can be used while composing (is it on paper? Is it a video? Is it a song?).

of real commentary to the photo—they were all just a bunch of people saying “haha!” or “lol!” or even “this!” I found myself a bit annoyed just by looking at it—why did everyone feel the need to add variations of the same comment? Why were people okay with having cluttery-looking posts with all of these comment threads on their blog?

I realized that this is yet another thing that has changed over the years. Back then, people still wanted some level of their own interaction to be present in anything on their blog. Since it was supposed to be more like a “traditional” blog, people felt as though they could not simply repost content without adding something to it themselves. However, the shifting nature of Tumblr has led to more separation between the posts and the person behind the blog.

This is a change that Ragan notes in her article—she notes that many people would save their commentary for the tags so it could not be spread around if someone reblogged the post. From 2013 to 2016, this phenomenon of putting commentary in the tags has become even more widespread. However, now it is less about privacy and more about the annoyance that I described earlier. People consider it almost rude to leave “unnecessary” commentary on the actual post, but if someone makes a comment in the tags, it is less noticeable and therefore more acceptable. Now, if people wanted to say a picture was funny, they would just say “haha!” in the tags instead of leaving a full comment on the picture. Or, if people were having a personal conversation that was not relevant to anyone else besides the people involved, it would take place in the tags (see Figure 2).

As more time went by and I became more accustomed to Tumblr’s unique form of blogging, I began to post a lot more. I was still posting a mix of personal posts and “reblogs,” but I noticed that I was leaning heavily toward the “reblog” side of blogging. I decided to click on the previews for some of the longer posts to see if they differed much from my original format, and I saw that the multimodality of Tumblr had extended even to

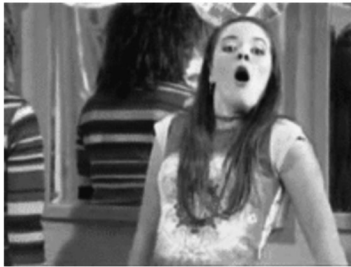


Figure 2: An example of a friend and I having a conversation through tags on Tumblr.

Literally the funniest thing just happened in the bathroom.

So, I'm walking out of a stall and I opened the door and Katie is right there and I screamed "OH MY GOD!" and jumped and grabbed onto the door. I don't know why I got so surprised but it was the funniest thing ever.

I was all like



And Katie's like



Figure 3: A post of mine from August 2012 that included reaction GIFs as a way to “spice up” the story.

my “traditional” blog posts! All of my original posts included lots (and I mean *lots*) of “reaction GIFs” (see Figure 3).

This is another trend on Tumblr that has all but completely died out. Tumblr users used to compose posts that sometimes included long trains of what were called “reaction GIFs” which were basically just GIFs of people showing any sort of emotion. Users would often comment with a reaction GIF, and it was not uncommon to see long threads with ten or more GIFs added as commentary. When commenting in general died out as a mode of communication on Tumblr, reaction GIFs were seen less and less in posts. Now, when people post GIFs, it is often out of artistry—users will make “GIF sets” of scenes from movies or television shows and play with the filters. Reaction GIFs have essentially died out as a form of communication on Tumblr.

These changes have reflected themselves in Tumblr’s features more than I initially realized. On an earlier version of Tumblr, users had the freedom to delete or modify posts when they reblogged them. This was useful for

long, annoying comment threads, but it also often manifested in humorous ways. A popular joke on Tumblr used to be to change posts from blogs like author John Green's personal blog, or Barack Obama's official Tumblr page in order to say out-of-character or funny things. In the aftermath of the 2012 election, someone reblogged an official post from the Obama campaign and edited it to make it say "S**k it, Romney" instead of the original content. Since anyone can click on the URL above a comment and get immediately taken to the original post, everyone knew it was fake, but it was funny to imagine that our president would react in such a way to winning the election. This joke resurfaced in an even more prolific manner in 2015 when John Green called out users for editing his posts and asked them to stop. Tumblr users did the opposite—they reblogged that very post and edited it. Because of the issues with people's posts being misrepresented, Tumblr changed their entire formatting for comments. Now, instead of block quotes, comments appear one after another, and users no longer have the option to edit previous comments. This means users are also forced to deal with whatever commentary might be on the post already since they cannot delete it. However, since almost no one is rude enough to leave unnecessary commentary, this has not been an issue (see Figure 4 for an example of what



Figure 4: An example of Tumblr's new format for commenting.

a typical post on Tumblr would look like now). Tumblr was able to take away that feature because the changes in communication meant that no one would have to utilize it anymore.

After noticing the major changes in how people communicate on Tumblr, I started to realize just how much has changed in terms of the site’s functionality. In my earlier years on Tumblr, I reblogged a lot of posts that joked about how bad the website’s video player used to be (see Figure 5). These posts would circulate almost constantly, but were especially popular whenever Tumblr made a seemingly “useless” cosmetic update to their site and, yet again, ignored the video player which was in desperate need of updating.

Posts like these were all too common until October of 2014 when Tumblr made a long-overdue update to their video player. These jokes at the expense of the player were so prolific that when the staff blog announced the update, they even referenced the slow update time (see Figure 6).



Figure 5: A joke about the slow loading time for Tumblr’s old video player.

A new video player (for web and mobile):

- **Pop-out video player.** Watch videos while scrolling through your dashboard for more videos to watch.
- **Auto-playing.** You only have to decide whether or not you want the sound on.
- **Vine and Instagram.** Properly embed your favorite six- and fifteen-second videos.
- **Looping.** Watch once, twice, forever, whatever.
- **Works.** Finally.

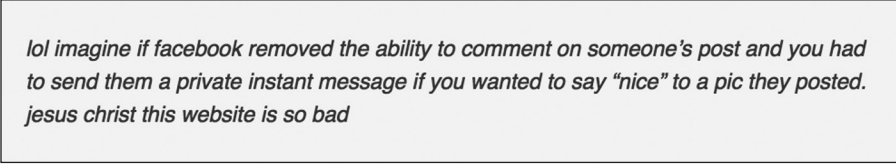
#features #finally

Figure 6: Tumblr staff jokes about the functionality of their former video player.

With this update, Tumblr encouraged the “cross-posting” that Ragan references in “Tumbling Through Social Media.” Users could now post Vines and Instagram videos with no issues, so videos became a much bigger form of communication on Tumblr. This is a change I definitely saw reflected in my archive. Prior to the update, I rarely reblogged videos—I could hardly even get them to work so I could see what they were, I naturally would not want to have them on my blog! However, with the new update, we were all able to finally enjoy one of the site’s key features. I noticed that my archive started to show more and more videos. Users also started to interact more with Vine and Instagram, and certain “Viners” even gained fanbases on Tumblr. Sometimes Vines would even reference “Tumblr jokes” due to their new exposure on the site.

This is not the only time that incessant pestering of the staff led to improvements. In December of 2015, the staff bizarrely decided to remove the “reply” feature, which allowed users to reply to each other’s personal posts and photos. This was a widely used feature, and users made sure to voice their disdain for the update. Users were not only creating posts that protested the removal of replies, but were also directly messaging the staff blog asking for them to replace replies (see Figure 7). Eventually, the staff gave in to the incessant pleas for replies to return, and in March of 2016, replies returned to Tumblr. Because the website had made such a drastic shift toward becoming a social media site instead of a strictly blogging site, the staff simply could not get away with removing a social feature.

This shift to a social media site is also evident in Tumblr’s newer features and in the features that did not quite make it as relevant features on the site. In 2011, Tumblr attempted to institute a “Fan Mail” option on the site. This would have functioned as a way for users to contact bloggers they were not necessarily friends with and tell them that they enjoyed their content. However, as Tumblr shifted away from an original content blog site, this feature became less and less relevant. When the Fan Mail feature became nothing more but a way for scammers to send links to blogs en masse, Tumblr finally deleted the feature in November of 2015. At first, I and most other Tumblr users did not even notice that it was gone, which speaks to how



lol imagine if facebook removed the ability to comment on someone's post and you had to send them a private instant message if you wanted to say "nice" to a pic they posted. jesus christ this website is so bad

Figure 7: A user expresses the irrationality of removing the reply feature from a social website.

underutilized the feature was. The fact that Tumblr was willing to delete a feature makes me wonder how long it will be before Tumblr removes the option to make a “Link” or “Quote” post. When I went through my archive, I saw a sharp decline in how often myself and others were reblogging these types of posts, until around July of 2014 when they disappeared from my blog altogether. Will Tumblr get rid of these features altogether like they did with Fan Mail, or will they remodel them into something more relevant for Tumblr’s current userbase?

A new social feature that has proven to be far more relevant and useful has been Tumblr’s new “Chat” feature. Tumblr introduced Chat in December of 2015 shortly after they removed replies. Users could previously communicate through the “Ask Box,” Tumblr’s messaging system that allowed users to answer messages either publicly or privately, but the general clunkiness of this form of communication led to a decline in usage. Even though Tumblr started out as a microblogging site, it had evolved into more of a social site, something the staff had clearly not considered when they took away the primary social features. Since, for many users, the point of using the site had become the social interaction, users opted to share other social media profiles in order to communicate more easily. The changes in the activity system of Tumblr led to its users being almost completely unable to communicate, and they were willing to jump ship because of this. Noticing this trend, the Tumblr staff opted to create their own instant messaging system within the site. This explicitly signified the site’s move to more of a social media site than a blogging site. The Tumblr staff now actively encourages direct communication and connections between users rather than a more distant connection through Ask messages and the now-defunct Fan Mail.

Through exploring my archive, I discovered just how much the site has evolved from its original purpose as a multimodal blogging platform. It is a shift that happened so gradually and naturally that I did not originally see it happening while this shift was in progress. Because of the compact nature of the archive, I was able to see five years’ worth of genre evolution within a few days of research. What fascinates me the most about this shift is that it occurred because of interaction between the staff and the userbase. I set out to analyze the ways in which the changes in the activity system affected how users communicate on the site, but I ended up discovering that this was much more of a two-way street than I originally thought—sometimes users adapted to new features by changing how they communicate, and sometimes the staff changed the website to more fully accommodate how its userbase actually communicates. For me, this is the coolest thing about genre evolution. As communicators, we have the power to change and ultimately improve the genres we interact with. I am particularly excited to witness

how the site continues to evolve—perhaps the staff will delete features such as the rarely-used Quote and Link posts, perhaps we will have the option to make our blogs private, or perhaps Tumblr will surprise us with brand new features we have not even imagined yet. I am especially eager to see how users adapt to these changes through new ways of communicating with each other. However, if there is anything that this research has taught me, it is that our own methods of communication, however quirky some of them may be, have the power to shape a website into something that truly works for what we want as writers—even if this is different from the website’s original purpose. We have the ability to make various genres work for our own communicative needs, and as we improve the genres we work with, we improve our own communication skills.

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