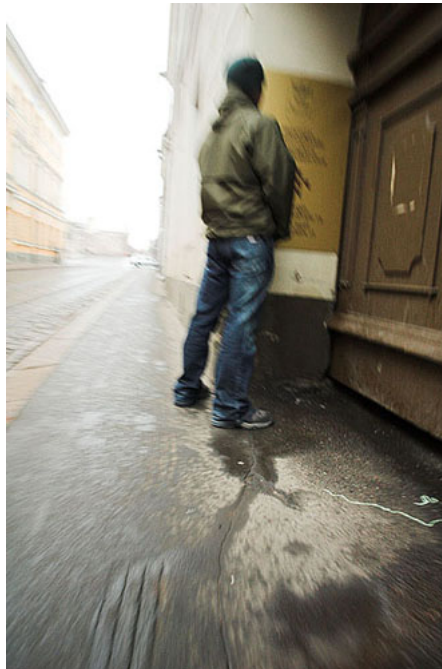


Why Flickr Is Better (For You)

I recently made an ill-advised post

[<http://forums.dpreview.com/forums/read.asp?forum=1018&message=13484318>] about photoSIG on DPReview, and subsequently got stomped on by what felt like most of photoSIG, on DPReview but also at photoSIG [<http://www.photosig.com/go/forums/read?id=223321>]. It wasn't fun, but it got me (re-)thinking about some of the social dynamics going on there and my reaction to them, and thanks to a gentleman (and very good photographer) called Stephen Schwartz [<http://www.flickr.com/photos/vasculata/>] I got into another type of photo sharing site. On balance, I benefitted from the experience. It seems it sparked another, more constructive discussion [<http://www.photosig.com/go/forums/read?id=223383>] on photoSIG too, so everything turned out all right for everybody in the end. So I decided to write up some of it, even at the risk of getting stomped on again.

Flickr [<http://www.flickr.com/>] and photoSIG [<http://www.photosig.com/>] are both photo sharing sites. That is, websites where people can upload their photos, share them with other photo enthusiasts, and get feedback on their work. The former is a relatively new entrant on the photo sharing scene. The latter is one of the first that really made it big. On the surface, they're rather similar. Yet in terms of social dynamics, they're as different as night and day -- and the Flickr dynamic is much healthier than the photoSIG one. The reasons behind this lie in the toolset that each of the sites provides. PhotoSIG is top-down -- with strict terms of service, a clearly delimited and defined set of functionality, a hierarchy of users, and a single, well-defined mission. Flickr is bottom-up: unmoderated, horizontal, unhierarchical, networked, and open to just about any kind of use.



Pissing is fun, but it's not as much fun to be at the receiving end. I think I got a bit of both during this exchange...

The Bland Trap

My main thesis in the posting that started this particular mess was that photoSIG has a social dynamic that exerts strong pressure towards conformity with the "lowest common denominator." I still stand by that, although I did go somewhat over the top in the way I stated the point and the way I belabored it later in the discussions. The way this works is very simple. When you start participating on photoSIG, you upload a photo. Other people see that photo, and critique it, giving it a rating between three thumbs up (TU) and three thumbs down (TD). The former is supposed to mean something like "fantastic, unforgettable, unique," and the latter, "disgusting, offensive, should never have been shot let alone shown." Moreover, you can also rate critiques as "useful" or "not useful" (equating to a single TU or TD), plus there are a variety of refinements such as getting extra credit for being the first to critique a photo that hasn't gotten any critiques, fifteen "useful" critiques netting you an extra photo upload, and so on. By doing this, you will eventually accumulate a "contributor rating."

All good, clean fun, right? Well, maybe. But then again, maybe not.

The thing is, we humans are more like lab rats than most of us like to admit. We're social animals. We're built to be extremely sensitive to social pressure: to seek approval and to avoid disapproval. We're also competitors: in whatever we do, when tend to compare ourselves to our peers, and try to do better at them. Sometimes this even takes rather nasty forms, such as trying to cut our competitors down rather than to reach higher ourselves. No big surprise there; back when these instincts evolved, someone who didn't get much approval and got lots of disapproval only got to gnaw on the bones after the rest of the tribe had made off with the meat -- and worse if he wasn't as good as the rest in bringing down the prey to start with.



There are times when our animal nature is even more apparent than usual...

In other words, this sort of thing is really deeply wired into us, and we have to be exceptionally strong-willed to be able to resist it. A simplistic treat/punishment system like the one on photoSIG is an extremely effective way of social conditioning. You have to make a very strong effort to resist the urge to mold your behaviour to conform with the norms the conditioning tries to reinforce. Of course, this can be a good thing, if the behaviour being reinforced is constructive -- and much of the time it is. For example, the system is very effective at forcing people to look at each others photos and at least pretend to think about them. Looking at pictures and discussing them is an extremely effective way of figuring out what it is you really like and what it is you don't, and if this part of the photoSIG ethic is applied as it's intended to be, I'm sure that it can be a great benefit.

However, when it comes to what is the main thing for most people, I believe the dynamic can be highly destructive. Photography, that is.

The reason is that the TU/TD system will tend to reinforce the kind of photography that gets most thumbs up. This does not necessarily mean photography that's worth a damn creatively speaking. In fact, it simply means photography that's pretty, easily digestible, and has no rough edges to stick in the throat. For many people, this means highly conventional, clichéd photography -- sunsets, golden-hour landscapes, moodily lit "figure studies," common-or-garden erotica, ducks, cats, and so on.



I shot this for photoSIG. It scored me 75 TU, or thereabouts.

All theory? Nope. It started to happen to me, and I saw it happen to some other photographers I associated with during my time at photoSIG. There was one who evolved from a technically uncertain but creative and individual photographer into a technically competent but highly conventional photographer specializing in soft-focus portraits, especially glamour. The trap is real. The vulnerability may take many forms. I'm not terribly sensitive to being told my pictures suck or that I'm a pompous windbag pseudo-intellectual. If that worked, I would've stopped taking pictures and pontificating ages ago. With me, the character flaw was that I'm a gamer. I love games, and I play them to win. If you've ever been stuck playing Tetris hour after hour, you'll know what I mean -- I started playing photoSIG like I play computer games. For someone else, it could be the need for affirmation and approval, the need to dominate, or something completely different. Of course, the trap isn't inevitable -- there are quite a few genuinely creative, individual, interesting, and non-conformist photographers active on photoSIG (including, I hate to admit, one of the guys who was most vocal [<http://www.photosig.com/go/users/userphotos?sort=id-d&page=1&id=35682>] in stomping on me), which proves that not everybody falls into it, or that at least some people can climb out again after falling in. Perhaps the ones who really fall in and can't get out again are the ones who don't really have much to contribute creatively anyway, and are most fulfilled in refining their technique in order to shoot ducks, cats, babes, or scenics (take your pick), in which case it's no big loss. Who knows, but I tend to think not.

The trap is there. So if you sally forth on photoSIG, I advise you to watch out, consume responsibly, and if you find yourself falling into the rule-of-thirds-pretty-tonality-sunset-landscape bland trap, for God's sake do something -- not necessarily get off photoSIG, but do *something*.

After this most recent episode, I went back to my account, picked a photo, uploaded it, but couldn't bring myself to save it and send it into the ether. All the miserable feeling of whoring for thumbs came back. I'd picked one that I liked and that I thought didn't conform to the photoSIG aesthetic, but then I couldn't think of any reason why I should bother -- I really don't want to see mindless "great shot 3TU" critiques or "it's out of focus and the highlights are blown but good effort 1TU" critiques, and I don't know what help "it's blurred and ugly 1TD" would be either. Sure, there is a chance of actually getting a useful critique -- but at least in the beginning getting such a critique is left purely to chance: that someone capable and willing of writing such a critique would happen to see the photo, and think it worthwhile to write one, for whatever reason. So I didn't. In fact, I requested that my account be terminated, as I really can't see what use I can make of it -- and if I change my mind, I can afford to buy a premium one.

Critiques That Count

One of the things that I believe are absolute necessities in growing as a photographer is looking at other people's photos and thinking about them. Talking or writing about them can help the thinking -- this is the

main reason I write all this long-winded stuff. A close second is hearing what other people have to say about your photos. However, except perhaps in the very early phases of the pursuit when you're still trying to figure out stuff like "what does 'good exposure' mean?" not all photos and not all critics are created equal. You benefit most from looking at and critiquing photos you appreciate -- and you benefit most from being critiqued by the same people. In other words, merely getting exposure for your exposures isn't enough: it's the kind of exposure that counts. Most people are too lazy, have too poor taste, or simply aren't capable of conceptualizing what they see in a picture to be able to say anything very intelligent about them. Critiques from them are not very useful unless you're specifically trying to make your work more salable for the particular kind of market that requires this type of photo. With critiques, both giving and taking, it's the quality that counts rather than the quantity.

With a site as large and diverse as photoSIG, the quality is certainly there, if you can find it. But finding it is not very easy -- the TU/TD dynamic and the continuous photo flow from all participants isn't very effective if you want to find people who speak to you, and perhaps to whom you speak. It can be done, but it's a quite a lot of work. Enter Flickr: a site based on a completely different and incredibly clever social dynamic.



This is a photo by one of my contacts, a fellow called Nevin [<http://www.flickr.com/photos/nevin/>]. He licensed it with the Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-ShareAlike license: [<http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-sa/2.0/>] something that's also very easy to do at Flickr. I get to reproduce it on my non-commercial pontifications website without even having to ask him!

Who's In Charge?

The fundamental difference between photoSIG and Flickr is that Flickr puts you -- the user and photographer -- in charge. Where photoSIG imposes a particular way of acting, Flickr gives you a set of simple tools and tells you to have a ball.

In photoSIG, you have a pretty limited set of actions you can do. As a photographer, you can upload a photo, put it in a folder, title, categorize, and describe it, write critiques, and mark other people's critiques

as useful or not useful. Then there are the forums, which are pretty standard BBS fare, with different tiers of users (basic, premium, mod, and the contributor rating next to each name). All of this is geared to one simple function: showcasing your work and getting feedback for it. The refinements are there mostly to push people into looking at and critiquing other people's work, which is usually rather more useful than reading the critiques. As a critic or "photography appreciator," you can browse the posted pictures by category, by rating, by popularity, by controversiality, in ascending or descending order. And that's about it, really. Eventually, of course, you may find photographers worth following and start watching their pages, form circles or cliques, and so on, but that's something of a side benefit. And all of this is dominated by thumbs and "contributor rating."

Flickr is different. It is a tool for linking up people, and doing stuff with your pictures. Everything is geared towards making it as easy as possible to find other people whose work you like, and following what they've been up to. Equally importantly, Flickr provides the tools to do stuff with your pictures: getting exposure and critiques is only one thing among many. You can blog, group, and tag them. There's desktop software that integrates with Flickr, and service providers that do the same. The palette is continuously expanding. Flickr is big on emergent order -- for example, you're not restricted to a predefined set of tags or categories: instead, you're completely free to make up your own. However, you can also see what kinds of tags other people are using, and you can choose to use similar ones -- for example, "blackandwhite" or "bw" if your photos are black and white, or "barcelona" if the photo has something to do with Barcelona. The same system works for people: you can add "tags" to yourself, under things like interests, books, movies, music, and so on.

The upshot of this is that the minute you set yourself up at Flickr, defining yourself with some of these tags, even before you've uploaded a single photo, you're invisibly linked to a network of like-minded people: simply use the search tools to find people whose tags match your own.



Photo by Stephen Schwartz [<http://www.flickr.com/photos/vasculata/>] -- the fellow who pulled me into Flickr. This is one of my favorites in his "Smokers" series. Some rights reserved. [<http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-nd/2.0/>]

Diving Into The Stream

But it gets better. Flickr treats photos as "streams." Each user has their own photo stream -- simply a chronologically ordered set of photos they've uploaded to Flickr. Together they form the "everybody's photos" stream. Now, suppose you're sitting by the stream, wiggling your toes in the water, and you see an interesting photo go by. You can click on it, and immediately you're in one particular photographer's stream. If you like what you see, you can make that individual a "contact." Together, your contacts make up the "your contacts' photos" stream: something **you** have picked up from the mass of photos flowing by.

Then, you can dive into your contact's contacts: the chances of finding other photographers whose taste matches yours there is a good deal bigger than just by sitting by the big river. And so it builds up: you'll be able to pick the wheat from the chaff -- *your* wheat -- extremely effectively. It doesn't end here either -- there are a great many other tools available, but all are geared to linking up people. For example, if you add someone to your "contacts" list or mark one of their photos as a "favorite," they'll know about it. This can attract them to your photos, and create a link that goes both ways.

Being "favorited" actually means something. Someone liked your photo, and put a little star next to it. Sweet. It's also quite interesting to see who favorited your photo. I've had only a couple of mine favorited so far... and one of them made me really curious. The stream of the individual favoriting it was rather enigmatic as well -- screen captures rather than photos. It's clear he uses Flickr for something completely different than simply looking for critiques. I wonder why he liked that particular photo, or whether he liked it at all and simply clicked the little star icon for some other, altogether mysterious reason.

All in all, the Flickr dynamic encourages networking, finding like-minded individuals (not just about photography), and pursuing the directions that matter to you. Whatever it is you choose to do, with the mass of people there, you will find someone else with similar interests. It is precisely these people that you should seek out: you will benefit the most from immersing yourself in their work. Naturally, you don't have to pursue a direction in photography to appreciate it. One of my greatest influences in photography does pretty much the diametrical opposite of what I do -- where I do up-close situational "people" stuff, he does quiet, contemplative landscape stuff. On Flickr, these differences wouldn't matter: all that does is that *you* recognize something in someone's work that you appreciate, and follow it... and perhaps get them to reciprocate.

This adds up to a social dynamic that encourages creativity and individuality rather than conformity and uniformity. If there is a "bland trap" at Flickr, it's much less insidious and the forces pushing you into it are much weaker, and there's a really good chance of getting into a virtuous circle where you do your stuff and get the feedback and encouragement you need in order to continue doing it your way. That's why Flickr is better *for you* than photoSIG.



Photographer at work at UIAH Media Lab graduation ceremony. This one is mine...

Unless otherwise indicated, all materials on this site are by Petteri Sulonen. They are licensed under the Creative Commons Attribution License [<http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/1.0/fi/>]. I would appreciate it if you dropped me a line if you want to reproduce them. Any trademarks are property of their respective owners; their use is purely editorial and does not constitute an infringement.