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Crosswords at a Crossroad: The Puzzle Turns 100. What Is the Clue to Its Survival?

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CROSSWORDS AT A CROSSROAD

THE PUZZLE TURNS 100.

WHAT IS THE CLUE TO ITS SURVIVAL?

by

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B.A. August 2009, Cornell University

A Thesis Submitted to the Faculty of
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ABSTRACT

CROSSWORDS AT A CROSSROAD THE PUZZLE TURNS 100. WHAT IS THE CLUE TO ITS SURVIVAL?

Lynn J. Feigenbaum
Old Dominion University, 2013
Director: Dr. Avi Santo

Celebrating the 100th anniversary of the crossword on Dec. 21, 2013 will be a dedicated, demanding and outspoken following – an online community that may be the key to its future as a popular American pastime. The crossword puzzle has always had a tight-knit core of fans, even in its earliest years. But, for the most part, doing a crossword was a solitary pursuit. That has changed with the advent of a burgeoning fan community on the internet, a virtual community of crossword enthusiasts. It is not far-fetched to regard the saga of the crossword as a microcosm of modern community building, a case history on how a traditional pastime can adapt to new media.

In this paper, my intent is to show – through research, interview and my own longtime amateur participation in puzzling – the importance of community to a leisure-time pursuit; and specifically how cyber-fans use their collective voice to influence crossword output both creatively and economically. Creatively because blogs and other web resources have raised the volume and reach of an active crossword fan base, allowing it to exert more far-reaching pushback on puzzle creators and content. Economically because with the dramatic decline of the crossword's longtime medium, the print newspaper, this traditionally paper-and-pencil pastime is moving online.

Complicating the discussion is a growing generation gap, a tug-of-war between younger and older puzzlers for what they see as relevant and acceptable content. Thus, the crossword is at a crossroad: an older generation forms a core part of the fan base while younger puzzlers are charged with adapting and shaping the crossword for survival in the future .

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Dedicated to my husband David (1941-2002).
Still missing you, babe.

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What? Write a master's thesis on the crossword puzzle? The credit and blame go to my tireless thesis advisor, Avi Santo, whose vision of popular culture proved too strong a muse to resist. His rallying cries – “Where is your discourse analysis?” and “Step outside the narrative!” and “This is interesting but WHY DOES IT MATTER?” – forced me to keep digging and stay on track. Without his encouragement and angst-management skills, this paper would be as blank as an empty crossword grid.

Other gifted, inspiring ODU professors also stoked my late-blooming dedication to higher education: Lindal Buchanan and Heidi Schlipphacke, who veered from their specialties to join my thesis committee; and Martha Daas, Gary Edgerton, Dana Heller, Luisa Igloria, Michael Pearson and Timothy Seibles. All their talents gave me a new, post-retirement challenge, with Humanities director Jeffrey Jones smoothing the way.

Alas, my children did not inherit the puzzling gene. But their time-starved support is priceless. Nancy's innate academic insights made me realize why she's such a great teacher while son John let me vent and grumble over morning dog walks. I hope this effort is an inspiration to my five grandchildren, though they'll probably tweet their theses. Friendships also kept me going. Despite her own great challenges, Linda has been my sounding board and inspiration. A shout-out too to crossword buddies Alice and Maureen, and newbie Steve, my tournament support group.

Most of all, a special salute to Will, Merl and all the puzzle editors and constructors who have given us so many hours and decades of solving joy. And to the bloggers, database keepers, writers and documentarians who enrich the art of crossword puzzling and our understanding of it. I don't know if they will find my conclusions an “aha!” or a “d'oh!” or a snore, but hopefully my thoughts will add a little something to the annals (two n's, please) of this great pastime.

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INTRODUCTION

FAN-TASTIC CROSSWORDS

The patterns or basic themes of culture should be deducible from the study of play and games no less than from the study of economic, political, religious, or familial institutions.

– Meyer Barash, translator, *Man, Play, and Games* (1961) by Roger Caillois (ix)

On Oct. 18, 2009, a *New York Times* crossword puzzle titled “Ahead of the Curve” paid tribute to the 50th anniversary of the Guggenheim – not just in its clues and answers but in the grid’s design, a swirl of black squares evoking the spiral gallery of the famed New York art museum (Figure 1). The puzzle’s constructor, Elizabeth C. Gorski, came up with the idea after seeing a Ken Burns documentary on the museum’s architect, Frank Lloyd Wright. Accompanied

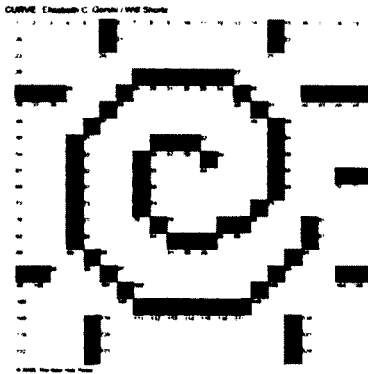


Figure 1. Elizabeth Gorski’s Guggenheim puzzle.

by “that beautiful slow movement” from Beethoven’s *Emperor’s Concerto*, the camera pans up the spiral and then slowly back down. “Burns used the Beethoven soundtrack in a way that was very powerful,” said Gorski. “I thought that the grid has to be a spiral!” (Tyler Green). The result was a veritable convergence of the fine arts and the art of puzzling.

In media studies, cultural convergence usually refers to the increased interaction of consumers with the movies and TV shows they watch, the books and blogs they read and the video games they play – passive audiences are passé. The 21st-century crossword community fits that pattern too, as we shall see. But it also offers another locus for convergence – one where two different cultures, popular and classic, interact and sometimes collide. That dynamic comes up repeatedly in the modern discourse on puzzling, a site of chronic tension between different generations of puzzlers and puzzle makers, leaving its creators to bridge the cultural chasm ... to put *The Iliad's* Homer and *The Simpsons'* Homer under the same roof. As for Gorski: I would not presume to put her in a realm with Chagall and Seurat, whose works are in the Guggenheim – and in her crossword. But her dazzling creation is a reminder that, like a work of art, puzzling has a provenance that shapes both the pastime and its satellite community.

It might seem ironic, almost oxymoronic, to call puzzlers a community – to look at solving crossword puzzles as a socially interactive pastime. Filling in those little black-and-white squares conjures up the image of a solitary pursuit, one whose isolation is broken only by an occasional, “Honey, what’s a seven-letter word for ... ?” In this scenario, puzzles from the daily paper are something to do over that second cup of breakfast coffee, after the kids have gone off to school. Or in the bathroom (the “loo,” to use a favorite crossword fill word); on lunch break at the office or between classes; a way to keep busy while the resident football fan watches the playoffs. Stereotypically, the crossword puzzle – “America’s number-one indoor sport” (Amende 145) – is what geeks and old people do, alone; a Solitaire game for wordsmiths.

The lone solver has not gone away. But celebrating the centennial of the crossword on Dec. 21, 2013 will be a dedicated, demanding and outspoken following – an online community that may be the key to its future as a popular American pastime. The crossword has always had a tight-knit core of fans, even in its earliest years; fans who doubled as puzzle makers and critics, or who joined puzzling groups. But their numbers were just a fraction of those solving crosswords regularly or occasionally – 50-70 million Americans, according to various estimates (Olsher 9-

13). And their voices were often lost at a time when only the occasional complaining, or supportive, letter to the editor made it into the public eye, and feedback was filtered by the reigning authority figure.

Thanks to social networking, it is unlikely that crosswords – or any such activity – will experience another hundred years of relative solitude. In the past decade, the fan dynamic and thus the power dynamic have changed. Today's enthusiasts are a larger, louder and more influential body, redefined by new technology and in turn using new technology to broaden the parameters of puzzling and challenge the crossword establishment. These puzzlers have come together on the internet, a virtual community of crossword enthusiasts. It is not far-fetched to regard the saga of the crossword as a microcosm of modern community building, a case history on how a traditional pastime can adapt to new media.

In this paper, I will show – through research, interview and my own longtime amateur participation in puzzling – the importance of such a community to a leisure-time pursuit in the 21st century; and specifically how these dedicated, outspoken and demanding cyber-fans use their collective voice to influence crossword output both creatively and economically. Creatively because blogs and other web resources have raised the volume and reach of an active crossword fan base, allowing it to exert more far-reaching pushback on puzzle content. Economically because with the dramatic decline of the crossword's longtime medium, the print newspaper, this traditionally paper-and-pencil pastime is moving online. Its emerging community – often meeting avatar to avatar, rather than face to face – is creating both new tensions and new opportunities, not just in crossword content but in how puzzling operates as a business. The evidence can be found in blog conversations, in the instant response from editors and constructors, and in the proliferation of independent crossword subscription and blog sites.

Complicating the discussion is a growing generation gap, a tug-of-war between younger and older puzzlers for what they see as relevant and acceptable content. Thus, the crossword is at a crossroad: an older generation forms a core part of the fan base while younger puzzlers are

charged with adapting and shaping the crossword for survival in the future – a tenuous or at least changing future with the decline of print media.

Continuity and Change

That the crossword is 100 years old can be viewed as a blip on the socio-historic timeline ... or stubborn endurance in a century of staggering cultural and geopolitical changes: a society emerging from Victorian constraints; experiencing the novelty of middle-class leisure time and the advent of prosperity, and later battered by economic depression, cycles of war, nuclear proliferation, natural disasters and terrorism. The puzzle endured despite such “distractions” as the advent of radio and television, the glitter of big-screen Hollywood fare, the lure of football and other spectator sports, the music overload from LPs to CDs, the visual lure of movie tapes, DVDs and internet streaming ... up to the present day, with its addictive dependence on social media, video games, YouTube and cell phones, iPads and other electronic devices.

Nevertheless, questioning the crossword’s post-centennial survival is not a stretch. In its brief or extended life span, depending on how one regards the span of a century, the crossword puzzle has shown both historic continuity and innovative change. The basic technique of solving a puzzle has been consistent. And, as noted earlier, the crossword always had a vocal, devoted following; in its early days, more tenacious it would seem than its own editors and creators. But while puzzlers still pay obeisance to the past, the crossword has undergone a dramatic rupture as it adapts to the times. Indeed, it is still undergoing these changes. For decades, authority rested almost entirely in a hierarchy of newspaper editors and magazine publishers who made the puzzle available to the masses. Will Shortz, the respected *New York Times* puzzle editor, occupies that pinnacle today. As auteur of the American puzzling world, it is Shortz who is the centerpiece of this fan base, which puts him on the receiving end of both its accolades ... and tirades.

Such challenge to authority is inevitable in an era when “ownership” of news gathering, political commentary, fiction writing and recreational pastimes has been wrested to a large degree

by “the people”; that is, everyday participants and fans. We see this shifting relation of authorship and fandom in other media: Blockbuster movies like *Star Trek*, MMPOGs¹ like *City of Heroes*, cult TV series like *Doctor Who* and *Babylon 5*, classics like *Pride and Prejudice* – all have become the focal point of such online networking as fan fiction, vidding, critiques, blogs, tweets and archives. Media analyst Henry Jenkins, writing in 2006, credits this grassroots creativity with the birth of the convergence culture, a site where “the power of the media producer and the power of the media consumer interact in unpredictable ways” (2). The key word here is “unpredictable.” Fans can serve as industry cheerleaders and proselytizers, expanding a product’s market with their enthusiasm. Or their “noisy and public” participation can result in what is seen as “renegade behavior” – making more demands than the industry or designer intended (19). Either way, the proliferation of fandom in the digital age has revolutionized popular culture. Writes Jenkins: “Fans are the most active segment of the media audience, one that refuses to simply accept what they are given, but rather insists on the right to become full participants” (135).

Puzzlers are full participants and more. The crossword’s pioneer fan base had no reticence in challenging its editors, contributing its own puzzles and coming together at tournaments and in small Mensa-like puzzle clubs. Camaraderie was a byword for The National Puzzlers’ League, founded in 1853 and predating the crossword by 60 years. Top crossword constructors and solvers also formed tight though competitive networks. But the few hundred participants in these occasional convergences are minor compared to the hundreds of thousands who cross paths on the internet today. This online fan/solver/constructor community has unleashed a steady and instantaneous stream of blogs, tweets and Facebook postings filled with rants and euphoria, insults and insights, and shared bouts of DNF (Did Not Finish) or DNFWOG (Did Not Finish Without Googling) despair.

With so many other 21st-century distractions, why are puzzlers still so engaged and energized? And what has kept the crossword community together? The crossword offers any

¹ Massive multi-player online games

number of addictive allures: The “aha!” factor, when that elusive word or phrase solution finally reveals itself; appreciation for clever clues or lively answers or a creative grid; the satisfaction of proving, even if only to ourselves, how smart and well-informed we are – all are evident in the blog outpourings and memoirs of dedicated solvers. In a way, the crossword is a sort of geometric Rorschach test, reflecting the human drive to solve a mystery, to fill in blank spaces, to prove to ourselves that we are intelligent, educated, linked into current affairs and faster than other puzzlers; that we can’t be fooled by those clever puzzle editors and constructors; in fact, that we too can be constructors and bloggers.

There is also the ambiguity of the crossword’s broad populist appeal vs. its intelligentsia-style exclusivity. But not to be overlooked is the nature of community itself – what sociologist Zygmunt Bauman calls a feel-good representation “promising pleasures .. a ‘warm’ place, a cosy and comfortable place” where “we all understand each other well” and “are never strangers” (1-2). It is a reminder that geography, ethnicity, religion, race and gender are not the only ways to define a community. A strong shared interest like puzzling also offers such a framework ... along with camaraderie and conflict. The same issues prevail: hierarchy, bonding, rejection, shared experiences, generational disputes, elitism, celebration and rebellion.

In the world of crosswords, this added dimension of togetherness comes to the surface at tournaments and on-line blogs, separate but parallel meeting places. Like Benedict Anderson’s imagined community, the “nation state” of crosswording has its pioneers and founders, its rules and boundaries, its rebellions and upheavals; even its own language. “Men and women look for groups to which they can belong, certainly and forever in a world in which all else is moving and shifting, in which nothing else is certain,” writes Bauman (15)².

The irony, of course, is that the crossword’s milieu is moving and shifting. It has always been adaptable. The crossword got its start in a New York newspaper, appealing to an educated urban audience with its historic and literary content, and even visually reflecting the hustle and

² Citing Eric Hobsbawm

bustle of a big city. To Michael Cowan, who combines film and cultural studies, the crossword form responded “not only to a consumerist desire for entertainment, but also to a specifically modern need: the need to assimilate an increasingly fragmented and changing urban spectacle” with its “chance encounters” and “crossings of heterogeneous phenomena” (214). If the puzzle resembles a rush-hour traffic jam or pedestrian hurly-burly, its boxy linearity also evokes a communicative facility: the frenetic crawl of news headlines on digital billboards and TV screens. Yet the crossword crossed urban barriers into suburbia and rural America. As it spread across the country through newspaper syndication and inexpensive magazines, Aunt Em in Kansas was just as likely to become addicted to the crossword as Aunt Wixie in New York.

Still, the “moving and shifting” faced by today’s community of puzzlers is not in its geography but in its medium. The puzzle remains a recreational fixture of print newspapers, along with other puzzles like cryptograms, Sudoku and Ken-Ken. But, as we all know, the print newspaper is no longer the default site for news gathering. Newspapers are shrinking, disappearing and otherwise cutting back in the face of computer-driven competition. Like comics and other staples of print media, the puzzling community is being driven out of its old Garden of Eden and into the tough, competitive realities of a newer cyber-domain. Paradise lost, as Bauman suggests? (3). Not necessarily. The crossword has shifted online, its following revitalized and even empowered as a virtual community. The staying power of that revitalization is a question for the future.

The iPuzzle and Other Eye-openers

In an era where Kindles are replacing print books and online media are shoving aside print and network news, it is no surprise that the paper version of the puzzle is on the road to becoming quaint, even retro. True, Tom, Dick and Harriet may still do their crossword puzzles in the daily paper. But with computer programming such as Across Lite and Java applet, puzzlers can solve online – alone or with friends. Those who are speed demons one-up each other as if

every day were a puzzle tournament. Diehards can do a half-dozen puzzles a day on various web sites or smartphone apps; the *Times* puzzle alone is available on iPad, iPhone, iPod Touch, BlackBerry and Windows Mobile. Plus there are almost too many crossword apps to list – apps from Nextar, Stand Alone, Crux, Sunkissed and Rampart, among others.

All the while, internet-based blogs alternately worship and deconstruct puzzle makers while scrutinizing and analyzing every clue, answer and grid innovation. In stream-of-thought association, pop culture references in crosswords often send nostalgic puzzle bloggers on a memory trip to a favorite song or actor or TV series, which they share with a YouTube clip or a Wiki-link. For fans, this interaction adds a dynamic new dimension to puzzling. For the select few who make a living from puzzles, it contributes to the survival of crosswords at a time when print journalism, and thus print puzzle syndication, is shrinking.

From my own vantage as observer-participant, I find the periphery of the crossword world almost as fascinating as the puzzles themselves. This world includes: (a) The puzzle's authorship – its constructors or cruciverbalists, as they're called in the curious language of crosswording; one term almost industrial, the other sounding like a deviant vegetarian. (b) A varied "caste" of characters including not just players and constructors but also editors, fans, competitors, memoirists and blog-analysts (you can be all or some or one of these). (c) The showmanship factor: Challenges to create increasingly clever, challenging and artistic grids and themes. (d) Content – clues and answers – at the mercy of ever-accelerating shifts in popular culture, from idioms and social mores to a who's who of politicians, artists, athletes and celebs. (e) A video-gamelike niche for the highly competitive, both in speed-based solving and one-upmanship in constructing. And (f) a distinct social vocabulary, with its own traditions, rituals and font of nostalgia. As Carolyn Marvin writes in *When Old Technologies Were New*, new media do not necessarily create new audiences or uses but they do provide "new platforms on which the old groups confront one another," changing the "frequency and intensity of contact" and renegotiating power and authority in existing groups (4-5).

It is this maelstrom of old and new platforms that piqued my interest in studying the crossword. I could be satisfied just doing a crossword, without delving into its deeper implications. But delving reveals a world full of complexities, both individualistic and communal, one that engenders lively philosophical and philological disagreement.

To demonstrate how crosswords, as both pastime and community, have changed in the digital age – or perhaps I should say acclimated to it – I will look at the conversation revolving around the *New York Times* crossword puzzle and its editor Will Shortz. Specifically, I will focus on three long-running (by internet standards) crossword blog sites: Wordplay: The Crossword Blog of The New York Times, Rex Parker Does the NYTimes Crossword Puzzle and Diary of a Crossword Fiend. My particular interest is on content and commentary that reflect the dynamics of today’s crossword discourse. I have selected three consecutive *New York Times* puzzles from June 2012 that I believe embody this give-and-take although probably any puzzle, selected at random, could work as well. For each, I zero in on comments from bloggers and posters that reflect the type of conversation, concern and feedback – kudos and backlash – arising from modern-day fan participation. These touch on issues of authorship and hierarchy, the generation gap, challenge to authority and content, and community building.

For needed depth and perspective, I have consulted sociological and historical works, crossword books, news and journal articles, and essays spanning more than a century, along with puzzle databases and other web sites. Most of the academic works pertinent to my research relate to fandom, authorship and American cultural history. Despite its longevity and challenging nature, the crossword itself is a mere footnote to many scholars. French sociologist Roger Caillois, who wrote about the significance of play and games in culture, predicted that both crossword puzzles and detective stories, like other “amusements of a more intellectual nature,” were likely on the way out (32). That was in 1958. Some three decades later, psychologist and theorist Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi dismissed the crossword as “a somewhat trivial but nevertheless illuminating example” of how word play contributes to *flow* (129), which he defines as “joy,

creativity, the process of total involvement with life” (xi). In contrast, the dozen or so nonacademic books focusing on the crossword are filled with the joy and creativity of puzzling; they range from puzzle histories and solving guides to humorous memoirs of puzzle addiction. I have tried to bring together these sometimes disparate, sometimes overlapping camps of “lite” and academic writing.

Almost an Anagram: Rap and the AARP

As in every aspect of popular culture, from books, movies and online games to spectator and participatory sports, the generation gap plays a key role in how the puzzling community defines and redefines itself. When I tell people that I am writing my master’s thesis on crosswords, the usual response – after confused silence or a raised eyebrow – is something like, “My mother does the puzzle every day.” That stereotype is not entirely wrong; older newspaper readers, perhaps the last generation to buy its print edition, do still enjoy their puzzle.

But a younger generation is a strong force in the crossword community, both in creating puzzles and solving them. “In my 18 years at the Times, I’ve published 27 teens and many more twentysomethings,” wrote Shortz in his introduction to the 2011 book *Word. 144 Crossword Puzzles That Prove It’s Hip To Be Square* by Natan Last. “Crossword clubs and contests organized and run by young constructors have sprung up on college campuses across the country. And the numerous crossword blogs that exist today are filled with comments by young solvers” (vi). If that doesn’t make the case, Last’s puzzle book is directed at “us puzzle-loving spawn of puzzle-loving baby boomers” and carries the warning: “not your parents’ crossword puzzles” (viii). Like Last himself, its contributors are all college students or recent graduates.

In addition, *Twenty Under Thirty*, an upcoming standalone iPhone and iPad app, will feature only puzzles by constructors age 30 or younger – with a special appeal out to “women and people of color” (*Diary of a Crossword Fiend*, 5/14/12). One of those puzzles will be by Tyler Hinman, who was 20 when he first won the American Crossword Tournament in 2005 – and went

on to win it four more times. Natan Last's crossword club at Brown University contributed a week's worth of daily puzzles to *The New York Times* in 2010. And David Steinberg was only 14 when his first crossword ran in *The Times* in June 2011 – the same age as M. Francis Cavallon Jr. when his puzzle, “A Four Petaled Rose,” was printed in 1924 in the first crossword puzzle book published by Simon & Schuster (“Mr. Cavallon is probably our youngest contributor, boasting as he does only fourteen summers,” wrote the editors) (29). And the same age as Will Shortz when he sold his first puzzle (*Wordplay*). Steinberg is also displaying the sort of entrepreneurial spirit that is bridging past and present by “litzing” old puzzles – heading up an effort to convert them to the computer program Across Lite. That way, pre-Shortz era puzzles from 1942 to 1993 can be solved online (Fleming). In other words, the oldest *Times* puzzles are being preserved by the youngest *Times* constructor.

Yet judging by participation at the tournament, senior puzzlers – “median age: AARP-eligible,” as blogger Rex Parker described them in a 2012 *Rock Cellar Magazine* interview – remain an entrenched majority. More than half the participants at that year's American Crossword Puzzle Tournament were 50 or older. And senior puzzlers are finding their own voice on blogs. “Crossword puzzles are for old people, and let's keep it that way,” demanded Susanne, a *Wordplay* poster (1/6/12), after complaining about “awful pop culture” references like rap music. A post on the *Rock Cellar* article speaking for the “under-40 crowd” might have served as a retort: “I understand that the AARP crowd is the biggest consumer” of the crossword, wrote Mike Menzel, “but it will also be the soonest to shuffle off this mortal coil so to speak.”

This generational and intellectual collision has a ring of familiarity. Certainly it resonates with social critic Dwight Macdonald's view that popular culture, along with its “debased” products, threatens “to engulf everything in its spreading ooze” (42). That expresses the uneasiness of an older, established fan base feeling threatened and unsettled by seeing their interest or pastime move into the sometimes alien subculture of a younger generation. Sentiments like Macdonald's have been applied to the perceived vices of computer games, social networking

and rap music. And there is cultural theorist Stuart Hall's divergent view of popular culture as the ground, or "battlefield," on which transformations are made, under constant siege by a disapproving dominant culture (1-13). Again, "dominant" here applies to long-time older puzzlers and constructors, whose ownership and authority in the puzzle world is being challenged – as it must be – by a younger generation.

The online conversation between generations is contentious and fascinating, adding a whole new dimension to an old pastime – and perhaps new lifeblood that will keep it going through the 21st century.

The Vanishing Newspaper

It may take the passing of an older generation for the crossword not to be synonymous with print journalism, "delivered to the door like a pizza" (Bogost 99) and comfortably sharing a page with the comics, horoscope and the arts. The lively conversations going on in the various crossword blogs show that puzzlers of all ages are making the transition from paper to digital media, and taking advantage of the solving strategies and social interaction that online sites offer. But will they follow puzzles, comics and other print-born amusements to the internet in sufficient numbers to ensure future viability?

Garry Trudeau's comic strip *Doonesbury* addressed that question in a recent (2/2/13) strip, with Zonker asking, "What happens to comics if newspapers go away?" and Mike replying, "What happens? Take a look." The next two panels are blank. Substitute "crosswords" for "comics" and the same question applies. While print news is not dead, it is shrinking drastically. Statistics, and the lack of statistics, make that clear. The Newspaper Association of America has not reported industry circulation numbers since 2009 (Chittum) and no longer does readership surveys (Olsher). But the NAA did reveal "quietly" that print ad revenues dropped 9 percent in 2011, a 60-year low and down two-thirds over a decade. The result is newspapers consolidating, shutting down or going online. My own 40-year journalism experience is a real-life testament to

this upheaval. Of the six newspapers I worked at as a reporter or editor, four have folded: *The San Juan Star*, *The Miami News*, *The Fort Lauderdale News* and *The Ledger-Star* in Norfolk, Va.

All this matters because print journalism and the crossword have had a symbiotic relationship for nearly a century. Since their debut in *The New York World*, crosswords have been a staple of daily newspapers, an essential part of the journalism experience; even an incentive to subscribe or buy one at the newsstand. Some 27 percent of newspaper readers solve the crossword occasionally, according to a survey cited by Will Shortz in 2004. And, referring to another survey, 1 percent of Americans in general named crossword-solving as their favorite activity (Ryan). I can believe that. As both features editor and public editor for many years at *The Virginian-Pilot*, the surviving Norfolk daily, I quickly learned that omitting clues or otherwise messing up the daily puzzle was guaranteed to keep my phone ringing all day.

Thus, having those strangely interdependent items, news and crosswords, go their separate ways is no small thing. And for both it is changing the equation, economically and culturally. Clay Shirky, who specializes in the social and economic effects of internet technologies, sees the “unbundling of content” as inevitable. “The idea that someone who is doing a crossword puzzle may also want news about the coup in Honduras or how the Lakers are doing — it doesn’t make any sense,” he said in a 2009 Harvard speech. “It’s never made any sense, in terms of what the user wants.”

I don’t believe that bundling is necessarily antithetical to the consumer experience. Newspapers – that is, the newsprint version – are designed to offer a menu of experiences: the main course (breaking news), sides (sports, business, features, reviews) and, finally, dessert (the crossword and comics) ... with a shot of celebrity gossip to wash it all down. Online, it’s different. If PC or iPad users want to do a crossword, they call up the *NYTimes.com* crossword site. If they want news, they go to *The Times*’ home page or another news source.

The New York Times' daily digital circulation exceeded its print circulation in 2012³ – just one sign that the journalism formula is changing, and that its contents are rapidly becoming unbundled. *The Times* obviously believes its online crossword not only has a viable future but is a moneymaker on its own. Its puzzle is syndicated in 300 newspapers worldwide and has been available to subscribers online since October 1996⁴. Now it has a new dimension. In July 2012 – just weeks after the credit ratings agency Moody's declared the U.S. newspaper industry's outlook “negative” because of the “relentless” declines in overall revenue (Saba) – *The Times* began charging its own home-delivery subscribers an additional fee to get its online daily and Sunday puzzles. Or Premium Puzzles, as they are called, giving them a sort of gilt-edged characterization. Up to then, print subscribers had free access to all *NYTimes.com* content. Now they have access to all online *Times* content but the puzzles unless they pay an additional \$39.95 a year⁵ – the same as non-subscribers. And that does not include additional fees for some online iMac, iPhone and iPod crossword apps.

Bloggers did not hesitate to weigh in on the new fee. “Lo! The people are angry, and I don’t blame them one bit,” wrote Amy Reynaldo in her [Diary of a Crossword Fiend](#) blog (6/26/12). “Before you know it, the Times will be going down the same road as the New Orleans Times-Picayune and forgoing that whole ‘printing a paper every day’ shtick.” Reynaldo was referring to *The Times-Picayune*'s decision to print its paper only three times a week, putting more resources into its web site.

But that is not the only economic sticking point for digital puzzling. Will puzzlers pay up when they can often access the *Times* crossword and other puzzles free through other online links and apps? Will crosswords, in the long run, succeed online? Shortz himself has expressed doubts. On the one hand, he sees the heterogeneous structure of crosswords – “your mind jumps from one thing to another” – as “ideally suited to the modern age” and to the shorter attention span of

³ Audit Bureau of Circulations

⁴ *The New York Times* will not release online syndication numbers.

⁵ Discounted to \$20 for current subscribers

younger puzzlers. But he also sees crosswords as ideally suited for solving on paper. “So if media becomes almost entirely electronic I think crosswords will be hurt somewhat. I think they’ll always be around but they won’t be quite as successful as they were in print” (Gold).

Another challenge is for puzzle publishers, whether in print or online, to develop or maintain a model that is profitable for them yet offering sufficient economic incentives for crossword constructors and programmers. *The New York Times* pays constructors a premium for its Premium Puzzles: \$200 for daily crosswords and \$1,000 for Sundays. That compares to a range of \$50 to \$300 per puzzle from other purveyors. The widely syndicated *Los Angeles Times* crossword, distributed by Tribune Media Services, pays \$85 for a daily and \$250 for a Sunday puzzle. Not exactly subsistence pay for constructors, who are forced to balance their passion for puzzling and the “ego-boo” of having their byline on a published puzzle with the reality that their labors are undervalued and sometimes even unpaid.

Guda Venkatesh founded Literate Software (Litsoft), which makes the Across Lite system that facilitated, if not enabled, online puzzling. But he is gloomy about the future of puzzling as a viable business. “Note that The New York Times is the ONLY source in the US for new crosswords with any pricing power for the product at the moment,” he wrote in 2010 on his blog [A Cross Business](#), “and even they might have trouble justifying providing patronage with the required investments in the new world, if we as an industry keep losing audience.” It is this possibility that puts more of the onus on the crossword’s online fan base.

Looking for Mr. Happy Pencil

“What is it about xword puzzles that keeps us coming back?” That question was raised by blogger @wood.⁶ And the answer should be as clear-cut as filling in 1-Down or 16-Across. After all, the crossword is a game of such seeming simplicity that British word-games expert Tony Augarde aptly summarizes its instructions in two short sentences: “Crosswords usually consist of

⁶ [Rex Parker Does the NYTimes Puzzle](#) (1/18/12)

chequered diagrams (normally rectangular) in which the solver has to write words guessed from clues. The words are separated by black squares ...” (52).

There is more, of course. Academic websites tout puzzles as a teaching tool for everything from vocabulary, spelling and language to history, geography and science. At the opposite end of the aging spectrum, neurologists and other researchers debate whether puzzles do, or do not, slow down cognitive declines like senility. Probably not. Recent studies have debunked the crossword puzzle as a potential Fountain of Youth for the elderly (Nickerson, Begley). Yet even if the geriatric virtues of puzzle-solving fall short, the crossword deserves its due as a cultural and intellectual artifact that has stubbornly clung to popularity for the better part of a century.

Artifact may be an inappropriate word choice. Times change, but the crossword has changed with them ... and endured. The modest puzzle grid is a showcase for 20th- and 21st-century icons: Lea Michele, the Foo Fighters, Sasha Obama, Sheri Oteri, Elmo, Esai Morales and Dr. J, to mention just a few faves. It is a marketplace of brand names: Post-It, Ikea, Ore-Ida, Edy, Iams, Oral-B and Ex-Lax. The “official” crossword cookie, the Oreo, has appeared in at least 228 *Times* puzzles since 1993.⁷ Crossword clues and answers romp on the playing fields of the NBA, NFL, MLB, NCAA, NHL, PGA, et al. They are transgendered and risqué (gaydar and boob job, drop trou and G-spot). And the language of techno-geeks has gone viral in the puzzle grid: texting and sexting, emoticons, iPads, nagware, HTTPs and HTMLs, evites and nagware. But the crossword is also a place where popular culture converges with its seemingly polar opposite, classical culture ... where a clue like “chocolatey Hershey candy” adjoins “ancient Greek coin”; and “Have a cow” unapologetically shares a grid with the Rimsky-Korsakov opera *The Tsar’s Bride*.⁸ For every “d’oh!” or “yech!” there is a “*mea culpa*” or “*et tu, Brute?*”; for every Snoop Dogg (now Snoop Lion) or Kiki Dee you’ll find an I.M. Pei or Beethoven. And, yes, all of these

⁷ Crossword statistics in this paper are from the database site *xwordinfo.com*.

⁸ 6/19/12 and 6/23/12 *New York Times* puzzles

puzzle clues or answers come from the once strait-laced, dictionary-driven pages of *The New York Times*.

It was my parents' subscription to *The New York Times*, way back in the '50s, that started me on my path to puzzling. A respected newspaper but ... it had no comics, so what was a kid to do? The puzzle, of course. And I've done it ever since – through my undergrad years at Cornell, as a harried housewife and mother, even as a newspaper editor entrenched for years in a shift that began at 3 a.m. In 1986, I used treasured vacation days from my job at *The Virginian-Pilot* to attend the U.S. Open Crossword Championship in New York. Unlike later tournaments, we had to prequalify by completing a set of preliminary puzzles. It was at New York University's Washington Square campus, where the tournament was held, that I first met Will Shortz, then an editor at *Games* magazine, and other crossword legends: Merl Reagle, Henry Hook, Maura Jacobson and Mike Shenk. To say that I didn't qualify for any of the \$3,250 in cash prizes, or even the six-foot-long trophy pencil, is an understatement. I ranked 203 out of 250 contenders.

Humbled but not discouraged, I continued puzzling and, some years later, began attending the American Crossword Puzzle Tournament in Stamford, Conn. (it later moved to Brooklyn), first in 1994 and annually since 2006. The ACPT is hosted by Shortz and usually attended by 600-700 puzzlers from around the country and abroad. Why I keep going is as mysterious as why people do puzzles. I still rank on the bottom end. Partly, it's the diarist impulse: I've written about Shortz and about my tournament forays for various publications, usually with a dose of needed humor to compensate for my painfully poor rankings. But there is also the strong call of community, a time once a year when puzzlers come out of the loo and into the limelight, and we can all rejoice and commiserate together.

It is impossible to ignore the changes in fan participation and solving techniques since the internet expanded, or exploded, over the past decade. Once I did the puzzles on paper; writing on that semi-gloss *Sunday Times Magazine* paper was part of the joy and challenge. Today, like many other regulars, I usually do them online, waiting for the clock to strike 10:02 p.m., when the

skating, leading blogger Ben Bass to effuse: “Look at this thing. It’s not a crossword puzzle, it’s a challah twist. It’s a tablecloth. It’s a standing wave. It’s an EKG chart.”

A Checkered Future

It should already be evident that the simple crossword is much more than a boxful of squares with a list of clues; more than a fixture in newspaper feature sections and puzzle magazines. Behind its simple construct lies a sizeable, dedicated and often effusive community of puzzlers, a corporate business strategy, and a small industry of creators trying to scratch out a living by appealing to a broad spectrum of fans. And they are doing so at a time when the



Figure 3. The ubiquitous crossword design.

crossword’s long-established delivery system, the newspaper, is in great flux ... like everything else sucked into the cyber-vortex. That’s the simplistic version of puzzle-economics.

Culturally, the crossword’s wealth of words and references makes it a cousin to the arts, from literature, architecture and opera to the pop culture offerings of *People* magazine, the rap

scene and YouTube ... an olio of high English and base street slang. It offers its own unique entertainment value and intellectual challenge. And for some, the crossword is virtually a lifestyle – a virtual lifestyle, as it assumes a growing online presence. Its random black-and-white pattern is so longstanding and ubiquitous that it has become, literally, part of the fabric of our recreational life ... even poolside (Figure 3). And, of course, it's fun!

Appropriately, the fun began on the Fun page of a New York newspaper in 1913 before exploding into a full-fledged mania a decade later. I've gone into some detail on this back story in **Chapter 1** because it is enlightening to understand any activity in historic context. "Games can teach us much about ourselves and the times we live in. The social life of the present and the past is mirrored in the games people play," writes Tony Augarde in his introduction to *The Oxford Guide to Word Games* (1984). "The enduringly popular games are restyled by each generation to fit the prevailing moods and interests" (ix-x). America's moods and interests were going through a sea change in the early 1900s, with the Victorian era coming to an end and a world war looming. This chapter traces the crossword from its inauspicious "birth" to its brief, meteoric frenzy in the mid-1920s, in the context of those changing times. Yes, the crossword has as much to do with the labor-leisure split of the early 20th century as it does with offering solvers a pastime they can claim as their own and the base for a social community. In this chapter I also look at the hugely disapproving reception evoked by the early crossword mania, much of it from *The New York Times* itself. The history of the crossword shows both resistance and adaptation to modern times, a generational struggle that continues today, and one that may eventually determine whether the crossword is an anachronism or an immovable aspect of America's recreational future.

It took the attack on Pearl Harbor to goad *The New York Times* into running a Sunday crossword in 1942 and a daily puzzle wasn't added until 1950. But *The Times* became the gold standard of puzzling. In **Chapter 2** we meet the pinnacle of the crossword hierarchy – *Times* puzzle editors from Margaret Farrar through Will Shortz. Each has a particular role in the

evolution of the crossword and its peripheral community. As a pioneering editor of the crossword, Farrar left a permanent imprint on puzzling; she is regarded as the founding mother of the American crossword. Her successor, the scholarly and modest Will Weng, maintained the high standards of the *Times* puzzle while instilling it with his own wit and humor. Then there is the third editor, Eugene T. Maleska. An educator bent on educating puzzlers, he is both admired and reviled, exaggerating a class and generational divide still felt today. Will Shortz is the fourth and current *Times* puzzle editor. It is Shortz who has taken the crossword into the 21st century, eschewing dictionary words (like *eschew*) and opening the puzzle to popular culture, though not without backlash. Comfortable with the media, Shortz also serves as the face and voice of crosswords, keeping them and other puzzles in the public eye.

In **Chapter 3**, I compare two different but interdependent crossword communities: the iconic American Crossword Puzzle Tournament, which for more than three decades has brought puzzlers together, and the online community that has evolved around the crossword puzzle. The tournament is a meeting ground for hard-core *New York Times* crossword fans. But today the weight of community is shifting to daily online interaction. In this chapter, I also take a closer look at the three primary blogs focusing on the *Times* puzzle – who’s behind them, what they tell us about this new cyber-community and how they impact power, community and authorship in the world of crosswords. The demand by fans for quality, creativity, relevance and challenge is not new. But expectations and impact are greater due to the instant and widespread exposure of the blog/Twitter/Facebook media, augmented by online crossword databases, construction programs and puzzle archives.

In this brave new world of blogs, the fan base demands its say and there is no shutting it up. In **Chapter 4** I analyze this passionate and sometimes raucous discourse through a close look at three days of blog conversation and other lively online discussions. As in the illin’ case, a disagreement over hip-hop etymology, the controversy can spill over into other media, even television and news magazines. But for the most part, only puzzlers get into the fray. What sets

off a typical crossword dialogue? Just about anything. Puzzlers usually want to talk about how they figured out an answer or where they tripped up. But often the trigger comes from clues and answers that are thought-provoking, ingenious, ambiguous, controversial, suggestive or obscure ... or that simply send puzzlers on a memory trip. Like most blog arenas, the online crossword community has its own landscape and language.

In all of these chapters, the generation gap permeates much of the discussion. The dichotomy between old and young puzzlers, between those who remember pre-Shortz editors and those born in the Shortz era, is a key factor in both the dystopian and utopian aspects of puzzling – dystopian because of the conflicting demands by younger vs. older puzzlers for what they see as relevant and acceptable in content; utopian because both sectors are an essential piece of the puzzle, and a key to its future economic success.

CHAPTER 1

THE CROSSWORD'S EARLY DAYS

The crossword puzzle turns 100 on Dec. 21, 2013 – and no doubt there will be a good deal of fanfare in the puzzling community. Look for Will Shortz, beginning his third decade as puzzle editor of *The New York Times*, to make the rounds of talk shows and for crosswords themed to mark the centennial. Perhaps Google will even turn its logo into a puzzle grid that day.

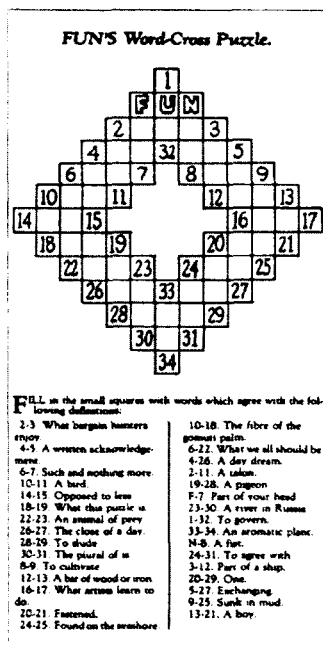


Figure 4. The first crossword, published Dec. 21, 1913.

But there was little fanfare a century earlier when Arthur Wynne, an editor at the once thriving *New York World* newspaper, constructed and printed the first “word-cross” for his Sunday Fun puzzle page on Dec. 21, 1913 (Figure 4). Years later, the puzzle’s success surprised Wynne:

“... all I did was take an old idea as old as language and modernize it by the introduction of black squares,” he said in 1925. “I’m glad to have had a hand in it, and no one is more surprised at its amazing popularity” (Costello 22).

What makes that popularity relevant to the present-day discourse about puzzling, and its dependence on a futuristic cyber-community, are the fierce loyalties and contentious wrangling of those early years – trends that would continue into the 21st century and set the foundation for the modern crossword community. This early history shows us a pastime that readily adapted to changing times and interests even while enduring a barrage of disapproval that is hard to fathom today. As we shall see, the crossword flourished in the relatively flippant postwar '20s, building a strong economic model and a supportive community that both challenged authority and paid homage to it.

Arthur Wynne had none of those lofty goals in mind when he conjured up the crossword. Like four young Brits who set off another American craze a half century later, Wynne was born in Liverpool. Unlike the Fab Four, he was apparently “a reserved and rather retiring individual” (Romano 39). Nor did his small inaugural puzzle grid, shaped like a diamond with the word FUN printed on top, look like it would revolutionize American leisure-time pursuits. As early crossword editors Prosper Buranelli and Margaret Petherbridge described Wynne’s word-cross puzzle in a 1925 *Collier’s* magazine article:

The checkered square, with its columns of definitions, was unsightly, had no decorative value, and was published as a sort of necessary nuisance, in the obscurest corner of the paper. No one in the office ever dreamed of amusing himself by working out one of the strange-looking constructions, or even bothered to inquire about the ridiculous game.

This deprecating view of the new puzzle is typical of the pioneer editors’ later writings on its debut and on their own accidental roles as its caretakers. Were they embarrassed at being involved in such a trivial, seemingly nonintellectual task? Buranelli went on to become an author in his own right and a scriptwriter for famous broadcaster Lowell Thomas (Edwards). Petherbridge may have thought that her history degree from Smith College entitled her to a loftier career. Or maybe they were just indulging in a bit of playful hyperbole, exaggerating the rags-to-riches origins of the crossword. But the impetus for its creation was indeed fairly modest: Wynne needed to fill space in his Sunday Fun section – preferably something new for Christmas 1913

(Millington 11). Nor was the crossword entirely unique. As explained by Buranelli and Petherbridge, among others, the new puzzle was inspired by those Wynne remembered from English magazines – a variation on word squares, dating back to ancient times, where words read the same across and down (Figure 5). Still, his Word-Cross – soon redubbed the Cross-Word due to a typesetting error (Romano 12) – was more ambitious, making the across and down words

S	A	T	O	R
A	R	E	P	O
T	E	N	E	T
O	P	E	R	A
R	O	T	A	S

Figure 5. An early word square.

different, interlocking them and adding definitions as clues, a tactic he borrowed from another puzzle, the acrostic. With this combination of techniques, Wynne created an early version of the modern crossword puzzle. Ultimately, the standard format became a compact square diagram of white spaces and black bars, with connected across and down words⁹, numbered clues and rotational symmetry – in other words, the empty grid looks the same when held upside down.

A 1963 *New York Times* article marking the crossword puzzle’s “quingagenary,” or 50th anniversary, put the emergence of the puzzle in historical perspective: Just before Christmas 1913, “the Panama Canal was nearing completion ... Pancho Villa was mixing up a revolution in Mexico. Maine and Vermont were deliberating whether eight miles an hour was too fast for an automobile to travel” (Willig 22). A few other things were going on in 1913: In Europe, territorial and military disputes were moving the continent toward what would become World War I. In the United States, Woodrow Wilson was inaugurated as 28th president; Congress passed the 16th Amendment, authorizing an income tax; and Henry Ford introduced the assembly line. But as for

⁹ In earlier puzzles, designated horizontal and vertical

The Times' retrospective insistence that the new puzzle would "change the leisure-time habits of the nation and, indeed, the world" – well, that would have to wait. For another decade, the cross-word or cross word or crossword, as it was finally spelled, remained a popular feature in *The World* but not worldwide. The puzzle had its devoted followers – a "bug" following, Buranelli and Petherbridge called it; "not large but faithful," including celebrities and the "intelligentsia" of the time (*Collier's* 12). Years later, Petherbridge – now Mrs. Margaret Farrar – recalled "a large and articulate following" (Farrar 12). Small or large, this was a hint of the entrenched fan involvement to come from later generations of puzzlers. The two crossword editors portrayed their early devotees as both nuisance and standard bearer – a persistent, loyal and vocal group who protested indignantly if the puzzle was omitted, regularly suggested improvements and complained about the abundant errors, most notably incorrect definitions and missing or misplaced clue numbers.

Chief among its critic-fans was *World* columnist Franklin Pierce Adams, better known simply as F.P.A., who in the early '20s occasionally recounted his struggles and experiences with the "Cross Word" in his Pepys' Diary column, perhaps a hint of the modern puzzle blogger. "Up, and tried to do the Cross Word Puzzle, but it was so easy I lost patience with it . . .," he wrote in Jan. 28, 1923. And a few weeks later, on Feb. 18: "Early up, and weary, so vowed to go back to bed after breakfast, but I fell to solving the Cross Word Puzzle, and then it was three in the afternoon, nor had I done it all yet. . ." (381, 388). Crosswords appealed to "urban sophisticates" like F.P.A., writes historian Hal S. Barron, "and to those who believed in old-fashioned gender roles and the traditional values of self-improvement and character building that dated back to Benjamin Franklin." Thus, crosswords early on came to be regarded not just as entertainment but as effete intellectual fare and an educational tool.

Then, as now, the crossword was regarded as either too easy or too difficult; its vocabulary too obscure or too repetitious. Puzzlers of the 1920s also demanded a unified grid with more interlocking word groups. And like today's bloggers, many of them wrote to *The*

World using *noms de plume* like Anaximander, Zodiac and Pegasus. Lowell Thomas relates the story, told to him by Farrar, of the pseudonymous Radical (“What, Communist? A Red?”) who wondered why clues needed two numbers, the beginning and end of the answer, like 1-6 or 7-10. Radical proposed dropping the end number, a suggestion Farrar adopted. “This saved space and greatly decreased mistakes,” she said. These charter fans also submitted their own constructions – invited to do so by Wynne himself, who challenged Fun section readers to make puzzles in an editor’s note. “With this short note Wynne introduced the concept of freelance contributions that instantly became the industry standard” (Arnot, *Four-Letter Words* 120) ... and instantly blurred the line between crossword fan and author, between amateur and professional labor, that persists today. “The result was a nearly endless supply of puzzles, had at very low cost: an early example of what Web 2.0 proponents call *user-generated content*” (Bogost 85).

Plaza 6409 and the “Aha!” Moment

The crossword quietly flourished at *The World*, a historic newspaper published by Joseph Pulitzer and renowned for two extremes: sensationalistic “yellow journalism” and groundbreaking investigative reporting. Along with the crossword puzzle, the newspaper also popularized editorial cartoons (Gordon 13) and invented *The World Almanac*, innovations that survived “the grim years of the First World War” (Farrar 11) and outlived the paper itself. When Wynne retired in 1918, he passed along his puzzle duties to Petherbridge, originally hired as secretary to the newspaper’s Sunday editor, with help from two other staffers – Buranelli and Hartswick. *The World* no longer had a monopoly on the crossword – *The Boston Globe* published a weekly puzzle in 1917¹⁰. But most newspapers did not pick up the newfangled word game until it was “well on its way. The greatest demonstrations of the power of the press to excite millions over trifles were yet to come” (Allen 167).

¹⁰ *The Boston Globe*, April 8, 1917, p. 43 contains a puzzle and a solution to a previous week’s puzzle.

And when that time came, it provided the “aha!” moment so cherished by puzzlers. In 1924, Columbia University grads Richard L. Simon and M. Lincoln Schuster – Dick and Max to friends and colleagues – founded their own publishing company. To help kick off the enterprise, they decided to publish the first book of crossword puzzles. Puzzle lore has it that the idea came from Simon’s Aunt Wixie, over dinner, on the very day they incorporated their business. There are numerous variations on this tale, including that it was all a joke (Farrar 12). But one way or another, the novice publishers took to the idea, paying a visit to *The World’s* gold-domed skyscraper on Park Row, some four miles south of their small office at 37 West 57th Street, to consult with the only experts: “Miss Petherbridge ... and Mr. Buranelli and Mr. Hartswick, surely a formidable trio of proper nouns” (Farrar 12). The fledgling publishers pursued the project against the advice of F.P.A. and the *World* staff, which insisted it was the “worst idea since Prohibition” (Willig 24), and despite the bleak outlook of booksellers, who told them the public “wasn’t interested in puzzle books” (Allen 165).

Why were Messrs. Simon and Schuster so determined on a crossword book? Maybe it was because they had “opened an office to publish books – although there wasn’t a book in the office to publish” (Willig 24). Regardless, the two men persisted; and for the “then-munificent advance” of \$25 each, Petherbridge and her two co-editors agreed to sift through the *World’s* “drawerful of unpublished puzzles” and prepare 50 of them for the book (Farrar 12). Since this was the crossword’s first exposure beyond *The World*, instructions actually began on the cover. Each puzzle had a title, the constructor’s byline – his or her only material reward for their free labor – and a surprisingly candid comment on the puzzle’s strengths (interesting design, “clever interlocking”) or weaknesses (too many black squares or too many “unkeyed letters”¹¹), similar to the sort of analysis that can be found today in fan blogs.

¹¹ Stand-alone letters not linked to another across or down word

After their initial enthusiasm, Simon and Schuster “began to have misgivings — intimations of early bankruptcy and the disgrace of their good name.” Afraid of being “typed as game-book publishers at the start” (Willig 27) and “hooted out of the publishing business”

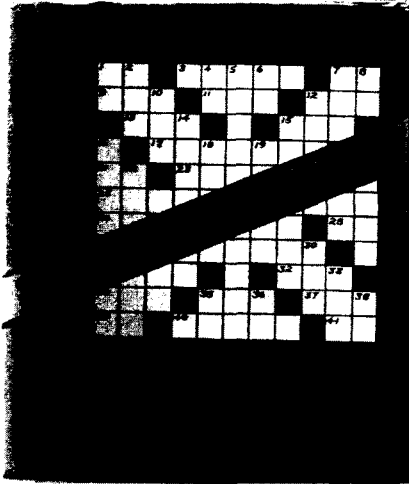


Figure 6. A 1974 reprint of the first crossword puzzle book.

(Kurzban and Rosen 7), they decided not to use their new eponymous imprint, creating instead the Plaza Publishing Company, a name they took from the exchange of their telephone number: Plaza 6409¹². *The Cross Word Puzzle Book* (Figure 6) was published on April 10, 1924, priced at \$1.35 – “quite a steep price for a book in those days” (Millington, 18), suggesting that its publishers anticipated a relatively affluent following – and available primarily by mail order. A bonus Venus pencil was included. “The surprise was that a couple of days later [Simon and Schuster] had some difficulty in opening the door to their office. A huge pile of letters was blocking the entrance under the mail slot” (Farrar 13).

The first printing of 3,600 copies sold out quickly and 10 more printings followed. By the end of 1924, three more puzzle books were issued, now readily available at bookstores. On a single day before Christmas 1924, 150,000 were sold (13-14). A craze had officially been born.

¹² From a Jan. 16, 1926 *New Yorker* ad

The founders of Simon & Schuster, Inc. (Plaza Publishing had become parenthetical and eventually was dropped) were effusive ... and confident enough to offer buyers a money-back guarantee. From the start, the publishers framed the crossword as not just a puzzle but as an integral part of one's lifestyle and essential to one's happiness – even as others later described it as a form of madness, illness or perversion, creating the kind of dichotomy that both cultivates and isolates a fan community. But in those early days, it seemed like everyone was buying in. Simon & Schuster's Aug. 17, 1924 *New York Times* ad for the second series boasted that the book was now an "American institution" and "the greatest known enemy of ennui," adding, with bold and italic emphases:

One does not merely
read The Cross Word Puzzle
Book—*one writes in it*. More
than that *one lives in it*. This is
one of the many irresistible
reasons why people are buying

Five and Six Copies at a Time

—thus, every member of the
family can be happy.

The Roaring and Puzzling '20s

And so the crossword craze had begun, with crosswords replacing mah-jongg as the most popular American game (Augarde 54). By the end of 1924, most U.S. newspapers were printing a daily crossword, "even the amazed *World*, which finally caught on to what a good thing it had" (Willig 27, 29). *Time* magazine, on Jan. 5, 1925, listed 14 newspapers across the country, including *The Washington Post*, *The Atlanta Constitution* and *The San Francisco Chronicle*, plus nine Manhattan dailies, that published crossword puzzles. A puzzle club was started (Kurzban and Rosen 7) and in September 1924 the First National All-Comers Cross Word Puzzle Contest was held in the old Wanamaker's Auditorium in New York, "the two finalists racing against time to complete a puzzle before thousands of frenzied fans" (Willig 27), with a *Herald-Tribune*

trophy for the winner. The crossword craze also went back overseas to Britain, where the *Sunday Express* published one of Wynne's puzzles in 1924 ("anglicising" words with American spellings) and the *Sunday Times* began printing crosswords the following year (Augarde 55), setting off the UK's own rich and parallel history of puzzling. The crossword also caught on in France, which claimed to have invented it 50 years earlier ("Paris Likes Word Puzzles"). Italy also staked a claim, saying the first crossword – a four-by-four grid with clues but no shaded squares – appeared on Sept. 14, 1890, in the Italian magazine *Il Secolo Illustrato della Domenica*. The puzzle was titled "Per passare il tempo" ... "To pass the time" (Crucienigmi).

Wherever it originated, Wynne is generally given credit for the crossword. What made America in the year 1924 so receptive to this humble word game that its marketing promoters unabashedly described it as "the greatest known enemy of ennui" and the key to earthly bliss? The unruly 1920s itself was a decade that had many labels: the Roaring '20s, the Jazz Age, the Golden Twenties, the Post-war Decade, the Gay '20s and even the Lawless Decade. After four years of the Great War, and the signing of the armistice on Nov. 11, 1918, Americans were embarking on an era of prosperity. "Everyone was past all the World War I silliness," said puzzle editor Shortz, who did an undergraduate dissertation on the history of puzzles and games. "The fact that it was the first big period for celebrities helped – if someone did crosswords, other people wanted to do them, too. But the biggest thing was that the nation reached a tipping point where all of a sudden everyone had more leisure time" (Romano 168).

This leisure time first came about in the late 19th century "when large-scale industrial production and craft deskilling led to work becoming something one did for a living rather than the way one lived" (Gordon 16). With both middle- and working-class Americans less invested in their jobs after leaving their offices and factories, work and leisure were split into separate spheres. Filling the leisure-time needs of this emerging mass culture were professional sports, circuses, minstrel shows, vaudeville and amusement parks as well as dime novels, humor magazines, newspapers and movies (16-20). Frederick Lewis Allen, in his "informal history" of

the '20s, *Only Yesterday*, originally published in 1931, portrays a prototypical middle-class couple at the dawn of the decade: Mr. Smith cranks up his Maxwell or Model T for the drive to work and follows baseball on newspaper sporting pages. Mrs. Smith still wears her hair and skirts long. With friends, they complain about the high cost of living and the imminent Prohibition. For recreation they go to Charlie Chaplin and Douglas Fairbanks movies or to the theater or to hotel tea dances, maybe to hear one of those new jazz bands (Allen 1-12).

Along with puttering around and partying, postwar Americans like the fictitious Smiths were also hungry for new “fads or fashions or dramatic public issues” and other “trifles” to amuse them (Allen 161) – at least until the Wall Street Crash of 1929. In 1920, the “wireless telephony” that became known as radio was “destined ultimately to alter the daily habits of Americans as profoundly as anything that the decade produced” (67). But there were numerous other new or newly popular diversions: bobbed hair, goldfish-swallowing, the ukulele, raccoon coats, flagpole-sitting, the lindy — “nothing was too frivolous to occupy the attention of a nation bathed in money and reveling in its newfound status as, arguably, the greatest military and economic power on earth” (Romano 40). Americans couldn’t get enough of spectator sports like baseball, football and boxing and do-it-yourself sports like golf and tennis. Also the “bee’s knees” was a long list of divergent crazes: aside from the Chinese game of mah-jongg there were beauty pageants, sensational murder trials, the Eskimo Pie and other food fads, novelty songs like “Yes, We Have No Bananas” and the positive thinking of “a little dried-up Frenchman” named Emil Coué who captivated audiences with his philosophy of “Day by day in every way I am getting better” (Allen 72). In this colorful array of games and crazes, the crossword had found its niche. Simon and Schuster made the progression clear in an Aug. 17, 1924 promotion – heavy on the exclamation points!! – for their new book:

1921—Coué! 1922—Mah Jong!! 1923—Bananas!!!
 1924—Heading the Best-Seller List—
 THE CROSS WORD PUZZLE BOOKS!!!!

In the Headlines and Behind Bars

Perhaps due to its slow start, the crossword puzzle was never trademarked or copyrighted (Amende 10). So its authorship at this time was a complex ensemble: inventor, Arthur Wynne; first publisher, *The New York World*; the editorial triumvirate of Buranelli-Petherbridge-Hartswick that nourished and modernized it, and Simon & Schuster, the catalyst for jumpstarting and marketing the craze. The latter, as though assuming some degree of corporate authorship over the puzzle, still conspicuously prints the phrase “The original crossword puzzle publisher” across the covers of its 21st century puzzle books and on its iPhone app. But even in the 1920s, no one seemed to have a monopoly hold on the crossword. On the radio you could hear the 1925 hit song “Cross Word Mamma, You Puzzle Me (But Papa’s Gonna Figure You Out),” which today is archived for posterity in the Library of Congress’ National Jukebox. On Broadway, Elsie Janis starred in the revue *Puzzles of 1925*, with one scene of puzzlers gone mad in a mock crossword sanitarium. And publishers were doing a boom business in dictionaries and thesauruses.

Nor did crossword mania go unnoticed in the press. With its reputation for dignity and seriousness, *The New York Times* – appropriately nicknamed the Gray Lady – did not publish games or comic strips and was certainly not about to print a crossword puzzle. Still, numerous articles and editorials on the phenomenon appeared on its pages in 1924 and 1925, attesting not only to puzzling’s appeal but to its marketability and inspirational quality. A Pittsburgh pastor distributed crossword puzzles to his congregation; when solved, they contained a biblical proverb from his sermon. A Russian grand duchess had her photo taken doing “cross-words” at the Waldorf-Astoria. The Baltimore & Ohio Railroad put dictionaries in its train cars for puzzlers. A cotton-goods manufacturer offered “attractive designs” of cross-words on percale fabrics, *The Times* reported, and puzzle grids were printed on everything from menus to dresses and jewelry. Another 1924 headline saw the “cross-word headache” and eye strain as a boon to the optical industry. Articles such as these, though hardly front-page fodder, gave affirmation to the puzzle craze while showing readers that *The Times* was plugged into the happenings of the day. They

also showed the wide and varied appeal of the crossword though, of course, always stressing its fringe or celeb following rather than the everyday puzzler.

But in that yin-yang, love-hate relationship that the media and pundits have with new ideas, often the context of such coverage was in terms of criminal activity, addictive behavior and social irresponsibility. *The Times* reported in 1924 that cross-words were helping Richard Loeb, half of the infamous murderous duo Leopold and Loeb, keep up his “good spirits” in jail – or so he wrote his “dearest Momsie and Popsie.” And that 35-year-old Welz Nathan was sentenced to jail for obstructing traffic for three hours while he was solving a cross-word puzzle at Broadway and 111th Street. “Puzzle proves a menace” read the headline on an article about a Detroit athletic official worried that it was causing team members to neglect practice. “They put on their running or bathing suits and then stay in the locker rooms asking each other for words that fill the white spaces of the puzzles.” In Cleveland, wives complained that their husbands’ crossword mania was leading to divorce. “Morning, noon and night it is cross-word puzzles,” said one woman in a letter to a legal aid group. “It is breaking up our home, for I have no time for them.” The mayhem didn’t end in 1924. The next year, a *Times* headline reported this Brooklyn fatality: “Husband Shoots Wife, Then Kills Himself When She Won’t Help Do Cross-Word Puzzles.” Even attempts at humor couldn’t disguise portrayals of the crossword as a malaise. In a 1925 letter to the editor of *The New York Times*, Philip Skrainka begged the medical establishment to forget researching a cure for cancer and find an antidote to the epidemic that “has sprung up in our midst – crossworditis.”

Gelett Burgess, author of the ditty “I never saw a purple cow...” and himself a crossword fan, put it all in perspective in his rhyme for fellow puzzlers (Farrar 14):

The fans they lick their pencils,
The fans they beat their wives,
They look up words for extinct birds,
They lead such puzzling lives.

A “Primitive Sort of Mental Exercise”

Aside from the headline-grabbing antics and “crime wave” inspired by the crossword craze, along with its incursion into popular culture, another factor stands out: moral judgments and warnings from those who felt they knew better – judgments that imply an almost apocalyptic doom to the lesser mortals caught up in this spider’s web of acrosses and downs. Even while a 1924¹³ crossword contest pitted “the smart set, in both senses of the word” from Harvard, Princeton, Yale and other leading colleges (Hal Barron), doing puzzles still smacked to some of being a distinctly lowbrow activity. One of the puzzle’s chief critics was, ironically, *The New York Times*, the newspaper whose crossword would eventually become the “gold standard” in America (Reynaldo 1). As *The Times* stated with glaring condescension in a May 4, 1924 review of the new puzzle book: “Every now and then some game comes along that acts with a peculiar stimulus on the mass mind—perhaps something like catnip on cats—and sweeps across the country with a whirlwind rush...” The crossword puzzle, it concluded, “seems to be as contagious as the ‘flu,’ and as certain in its conquering power.” That put puzzlers in their place – somewhere between felines lusting for catnip and victims of a serious illness. Even more deadly was the headline: “Cross Word Puzzles Embalmed Between Covers”!

Six months later, the newspaper again looked down its journalistic nose at the new craze. In a Nov. 17, 1924 editorial, it branded cross-word puzzles as the latest “form of temporary madness” and “a primitive sort of mental exercise ... irrelevant to mental development.” Neither a game nor a sport, sniffed *The Times*, the crossword is “a sinful waste in the utterly futile finding of words the letters of which will fit into a prearranged pattern.” A puzzler from Stamford, Conn., which would later be the site of the annual crossword tournament, protested this grammatically strained condemnation in a letter to the editor. Wrote Louise A. Sinclair: “I cannot but believe that in this day of looking and listening, of movies and radio, a sport which demands a little thinking should not be utterly despised.”

¹³ In *What’s Gnu* (99), Arnot puts the contest on Jan. 4, 1925.

Nevertheless, *The New York Times* continued its assault. In a 1924 column called By-Products, it reported the opinion of J.C. Squires in *The London Observer*, branding the puzzle as one of “the various drugs to which the American people are reputed to have taken as a substitute for hard drink.” In a 1925 editorial, *The Times* took note of a *New Republic* article asserting that, because of their “false definitions,” crosswords are not educational and “that for a writer or speaker no exercise possibly could be worse than working on these puzzles.” *The Times* agreed and concluded that the crossword would soon be gone and forgotten, its loss regretted monetarily only by the “agile compilers” of puzzle books – thus adding avarice to its list of sins. Once again a reader, Harold Brockelbank, came to the puzzle’s defense, noting that “while it is found necessary at times to use a ‘freak’ word to complete a section, that particular defect is not sufficient to condemn the ‘so-called fad’ to ultimate and quick extinction.” But anti-puzzling sentiments had even spread overseas. In December 1924, *The Times* of London wrote an article “The Enslaved America” which noted that “All America has succumbed to the crossword puzzle” and that the crossword was “a menace because it is making devastating inroads on the working hours of every rank of society” (Millington 21).

While news stories are not supposed to editorialize, a newspaper’s choice of issues often reflects the attitudes of its publisher or editors. In *The New York Times* of the ’20s, both reporting and opinion pieces demonstrated a concern with societal standards and lifestyle choices. Early in 1925, *The Times* ran an interview with British anthropologist Sir Arthur Keith, who lamented that the “man of tomorrow” would be lacking in intellect and “retain a lot of animal in him.” As proof, he noted that even the “most intellectual” newspaper devoted most of its space to subjects like sports, crime, sex, gambling and politics. “Even crossword puzzles I regard as an ebullition of an animal nature,” he concluded. In a similar vein, a New York University professor declared that American men had no culture (women fared better); in the July 11, 1925 *Times* article, he blamed such distractions as gum-chewing, influenza, radio, jazz and, of course, crossword puzzles.

Why such a severe reaction to something as seemingly unthreatening as a crossword puzzle? In the early '20s, a “revolution in manners and morals” – particularly among the younger generation – was a major source of angst: “nice” girls were wearing shorter skirts, “abandoning their corsets” and smoking cigarettes; women were leaving the home front to go to work; Sigmund Freud was recommending “an uninhibited sex life” and, as the Lynds pointed out in their 1939 sociological study *Middletown*, the automobile was becoming its vehicle – “a house of prostitution on wheels” (Allen 76-87). While the crossword craze was tame in comparison, it obviously reflected loss of control and thus could not escape the quivering antennae of the era’s nervous moral censors.

Writing in 1999, Hal Barron, a puzzler as well as a professor of history, believes crossworders became “the objects of parody, teasing, and other nervous humor” because “such a compulsion about something other than work or duty ... was both novel and troublesome in an American culture still informed by Victorian sensibilities ... The 1920s were a period of profound social change, and crossword puzzles were popular because they stood at the cultural crossroads between Victorianism and modernism”; between a life of labor and one of slothful self-indulgence.

Even the 1925 *Collier's* article by its “starters” contained a humorous commentary that made the puzzle sound like an alien invasion and its editors, Buranelli and Petherbridge, like sociopaths. A pullout under their photos reads: “They are gentle, inoffensive persons, but for calculating cruelty their work makes the Spanish Inquisition look like kindergarten punishment. They started the crossword puzzle craze—nursed it and fought for it before it could crawl. And now look at the thing! We shall lure them to the office some day. An open elevator shaft, a quick shove—and we can go home in peace.” I suspect the cheeky Buranelli and Petherbridge wrote this themselves to satirize the scorn heaped on the crossword puzzle and its followers.

Words were not the only tool for passing judgment. In their illustrated humor, magazines such as *Life* “helped middle-class Americans adapt to an emerging mass culture” (Gordon 20). So



Figure 7. Crossword mania reflected on a 1925 magazine cover.

it is noteworthy that the crossword mania was captured on the Jan. 31, 1925 cover of the popular *Saturday Evening Post* magazine (Figure 7) and that it was drawn by Norman Rockwell, a well-known illustrator of Americana. A 2009 auction catalogue states that this cover “captures some of the fascination and controversy surrounding the humble crossword puzzle ... While the public embraced it there were many detractors. Some moralizers at the time felt it was merely a waste of intellectual activity, while librarians specifically complained of crossword solvers dominating their dictionaries and encyclopedias to the detriment of more legitimate users.” The illustration captures that dichotomy by showing “two old codgers” who once might have been playing

checkers but now one “dangles the newly minted crossword book and scans the ceiling for the right word, while his collaborator scours the dictionary” (Bonhams).

Surviving Apods, Snees, Esnes and Rocs

In its Jan. 5, 1925, “barometer” of the crossword’s popularity, *Time* magazine cited two opposing views: “This crossword craze will positively end by June!” vs. “The crossword puzzle is here to stay!” Both were correct. By mid-1925, the mania was already dying down – or at least, shedding some of its spectacle and notoriety. The puzzle’s arcane vocabulary was partly to blame, noted the 1963 *New York Times* article. “Within a few years, the crossword became so cliché-ridden with its apods, snees, esnes and rocs that many people lost interest and went on to other fun...” (Willig 29). One early reference, the 1933 *Kehlor Key to Crossword Puzzles*, had 125 pages of obscure words in such general categories as animals, trees, fairies, money and mythology, with blank facing pages for puzzlers to add their own lists of equally obscure words. The animal category included not just monkeys, fish and snakes but also humans, devils and slavery, so that in the alphabetical listing, the Hawaiian bird IWI is followed by prayer leader IMAM, Kafir warriors IMPI and “the gloomy dean” INGE (23). That obscure vocabulary was evident in what Joseph B. Robison, in a 1964 *New York Times* letter to the editor, recalled as the “Crossword Puzzlers’ Cheer”:

Anger, ire, temper, rage!
Era, epoc, eon, age!
Do, re mi and fa, sol, la!
Egyptian Sun God – Ra! Ra!! Ra!!!

But the crossword was far from dead. “Unlike other fads of the ’20s, like raccoon coats and flagpole sitting, crossword puzzles had staying power,” Shortz wrote in *Ephemera*. “After the furor abated, some newspapers tried to drop the feature, but complaints were so numerous that the puzzles were quickly reinstated.” What gave the crossword puzzle its staying power – or, as Margaret Petherbridge Farrar put it (Farrar 15), made it the “longest flash in the pan in history”? As we shall see in the next chapter, Farrar herself deserves much of the credit. She not only

encouraged a community of followers but brought the crossword to *The Times* and raised the puzzle's quality standards, thus elevating her even higher in the authorship hierarchy. There were other stubbornly enduring games from the first half of the 20th century – games like mah-jongg, bridge and Scrabble, “the most successful crossword offshoot” (Arnot, *What's Gnu* 166). But, of these, only the crossword was a solitary, seemingly noncompetitive pursuit. So what kept players coming back for more? In their 1925 *Collier's* article, written while the crossword craze was still at its peak, Buranelli and Petherbridge/Farrar found three elements to explain its lure: “The fascination of words common to an articulate race. Self-education. Time killing.”

The early pages of Simon and Schuster's first puzzle book describe the lure of crosswords even more expressively: “There is the pure esthetic stimulation of looking at the pattern with its neat black and white squares, like a floor in a cathedral or a hotel bathroom; there is the challenge of the definitions, titillating the combative ganglion that lurks in all of us; and there is the thrill of triumph as the right word is found, fitted, and its attendant branches and roots spring into being” (Buranelli et al, *The Cross Word Puzzle Book*, 3). Comparing the crossword grid to such disparate locales as a cathedral and a bathroom captures the extremes of its appeal: lofty and base, intellectual and populist, magnificent and petty – factors reflected even today in puzzlers' expectations and delight in the crossword puzzle, and occasional disappointment.

CHAPTER 2

THE TIMES PUZZLE'S BIG FOUR

Like any community, puzzling has its own hierarchy, its own cults of personality. And once *The New York Times* crossword became the gold standard in America, its puzzle editor was the primary figure of authority, creativity and negotiation, both for the supply side (constructors) and the clientele (puzzling subscribers). To date, *The Times* has had only four puzzle editors in seven decades. All have played a similar role in their responsibilities and editing of the newspaper's puzzles. But each has had different notions of authorship, different notions about the importance of community and the role it plays in this recreational pastime, and different approaches to language. To non-puzzlers, the names of these four editors may be unfamiliar. To crossword fans, even young puzzlers who have only known the latest editor, their names are as familiar as heads of state. Their history is a clue to understanding the state of puzzling today, leading up to the changes brought by computer access to crosswords and the impact of social networking.

Margaret Farrar, Pioneer

The World came to an end in 1931. That didn't affect Margaret Petherbridge, a key figure throughout the crossword's early years. She had left the newspaper in 1926 to marry John Farrar and start a family, though, as Mrs. Margaret Farrar, she continued to edit puzzles for Simon & Schuster's continuing series of crossword books. In fact, Farrar used her royalties from the crossword books – invested by her father in U.S. Steel and Standard Oil – to underwrite her husband's publishing business (Arnot, *What's Gnu* 52). Thus, two major American publishers – Farrar, Straus & Giroux and Simon & Schuster – got their start from the humble crossword.

Nor did *The World's* demise affect the success of crossword puzzles. By now they were being reproduced daily or weekly in newspapers around the country, most notably *The New York Herald Tribune*, and offered by print syndicates like William Randolph Hearst's King Features,

which also licensed such classic characters as Popeye and Betty Boop, Dennis the Menace and The Phantom, putting the crossword in good company with other elements of Americana. The first crossword magazines debuted in 1924-5, followed in 1931 by the publishing of *Dell Crossword Puzzles*, the longest running crossword magazine (Shortz, *Ephemera*). And the puzzle also had a solid foothold in England, Europe and some parts of Asia (Farrar 15). Dictionaries and thesauruses catered to puzzlers coping with the crossword's reliance on pedantic and encyclopedic vocabulary.

One area where the crossword was conspicuously absent was *The New York Times*. But that finally changed on Feb. 15, 1942. "It says something about the nature of influence that *The Times*, completely un-influential in extirpating the crossword, turned about and made its puzzle the most influential in the land," writes Richard F. Shepard in a 1992 article marking the *Times* puzzle's 50th anniversary. "But it wasn't easy. Right from the start, The Times's editors were wary about admitting unvarnished frivolity into their pages. Things like that might lead to, bite the tongue, comic strips." Publisher Adolph Ochs had specifically banned both these frivolities. Nevertheless, the *Times* crossword puzzle made its Sunday-only debut just a little more than two months after the bombing of Pearl Harbor. "Why, at the beginning of World War II," asks Shepard, "when the world was exploding at its seams, was The Times fussing about a puzzle?"

The "apocryphal story," as Farrar tells it, is that publisher Arthur Hays Sulzberger, who succeeded Ochs, his father-in-law, as *Times* publisher in 1935, didn't like having to buy *The Herald Tribune* to do his Sunday crossword (Farrar 16). Another account cites a Dec. 18, 1941 memo from *Times* Sunday editor Lester Markel saying that the puzzle would be a good antidote to a likely scenario of "bleak blackout hours" during the war years. Markel refers to meeting with Margaret Petherbridge Farrar, who made the case for running a crossword in *The Times*. "I don't think I have to sell you on the increased demand for this kind of pastime in an increasingly worried world," she wrote Markel. "You can't think of your troubles while solving a crossword ..." (Shepard).

Whatever the impetus, the decision was made. And Margaret Petherbridge Farrar – who got involved in puzzles reluctantly and “almost as an afterthought,” as noted in her obituary decades later – became the first crossword puzzle editor of *The New York Times*, a job she kept for 27 years. There were no apologies for its years of puzzle-bashing when *The Times* quietly announced the new feature on Feb. 15, 1942:

Beginning today, The New York Times inaugurates a puzzle page. There will be two puzzles each Sunday – one with a flavor of current events and general information, and one varied in theme, ranging from puzzles in lighter vein, like today’s smaller one, to diagramless puzzles of a general nature ...”

No apologies, maybe, but mentioning the “flavor of current events and general information” was a blatant attempt to give puzzling sufficient gravity and pedagogical status for a newspaper with the motto “All the news that’s fit to print.” That first crossword’s title was “Headlines and Footnotes” while the lighter fare was “Riddle Me This” by one “Anna Gram,” a pseudonym or *nom de puzzle* sometimes used by Farrar herself (Kurzban and Rosen 13). Eventually, Farrar “dampened the paper’s charge in the 1940s to elevate the puzzle to the rest of the publication’s high standards, opting instead for softer though still intellectual fare” (Bogost 88). It took almost another eight years before the crossword made its daily debut in *The Times*’ book review section, on Sept. 11, 1950. Not everyone was happy. “Next you will be having comic strips and gabbling columnists,” wrote reader Chauncey B. Downes, channeling Ochs’ concerns in a letter to *The Times*.

The crosswords in today’s *New York Times* are a direct legacy of Farrar, who set high standards for construction while also loosening them up enough to make them enjoyable. “Margaret Farrar’s legacy is immense,” states a biography of Farrar in *Notable American Women* (202), written by Helene Hovanec and Shortz. “She took a puzzle that was thrown together and riddled with errors and made it respectable by devising rules for its elegant construction. The evolution of the crossword from a dry, straightforward challenge into a lively game of witty, literate wordplay, enjoyed by millions, is directly attributable to her influence.” Under Farrar’s

oversight, the puzzle gained its graceful symmetry and interlocking pattern while losing its two-number clues, “unkeyed” letters, two-letter words and overabundance of black squares. Answers could be a phrase, rather than just a single word. And puzzle themes, often playful, were introduced. In addition, she encouraged contributors, building a core group that included “a retired violinist, a sea captain, and a few prison inmates” (202) – just as today crossword constructors come from a wide array of contributors, from students to professionals to dabblers, constituting the nucleus of the crossword community. Reflecting her esteem in this community, Margaret Farrar was dubbed the Queen of Crosswords by *Good Housekeeping* magazine and by others the Grande Dame or First Lady of puzzles (Arnot, *Four-Letter Words* 29-39).

Interestingly, one Farrar legacy has faded – her taboo on anything in poor taste, particularly illness and medical treatments. “Crosswords are an entertainment. Avoid things like death, disease, war and taxes – the subway solver gets enough of that in the rest of the paper,” she wrote constructor Merl Reagle, then 16, when explaining why she rejected his puzzle with such words as edema, accumulation of fluid in bodily tissues, and rale, the death rattle (Gaffney 39). While leukemia, syphilis and diarrhea are still absent from the 21st century *Times* puzzle, Farrar might be shocked (or at least bemused) to learn that zits, acne, styes and even e-coli are rampant today.

Will Weng, Wit and Gentle Man

After Farrar retired in 1969, Will Weng – chief of *The Times*’ “word-picky metropolitan copy desk” (Behrens) – was tapped as the new crossword editor, bringing along years of experience constructing puzzles. “Like Farrar, Weng stressed innovation and fun and the solver’s pleasure,” writes Matt Gaffney, a crossword constructor, in his 2006 book *Gridlock: Crossword Puzzles and the Mad Geniuses Who Create Them*. Gaffney also describes Weng as “a character who edited to mostly favorable reviews” (40), which implies a solid B in the school of crosswording. Other constructors also laud his “Weng-centric humor.” Said puzzle editor and

constructor Jim Page: “He liked humor – and the wackier the better” (Amende 20-1). But while the Indiana-born Weng began constructing puzzles in the ’50s and continued editing crossword books after his retirement in 1977, he appears to have kept out of the limelight – few interviews, no books or memoirs. He was regarded as a “quiet, gentle man who tried assiduously to avoid confrontation” (Severo). Even at regular lunches he hosted in Manhattan for crossword constructors and editors, “Weng always sat at the head of the table but never held court. A modest person, he’d rather listen than talk ...” (Hovanec, CROSSWORD). Perhaps because of that modesty, Weng is mentioned only briefly in histories of the crossword puzzle. And let me add that I harbor no ill will against him for rejecting my first puzzle submission in 1976, which I had titled “Fit to Print” after *The New York Times* motto. My optimism wasn’t fulfilled. “The diagram has far too many black squares,” began his lengthy litany of its failures.

In a very brief foreword to Kurzban and Rosen’s *The Compleat Cruciverbalist*, written after his retirement, Weng almost apologizes for crosswords, “a relatively harmless plague,” echoing the sort of language used by its detractors in the ’20s: “The whole puzzle field is frothy and fleeting, and should never be taken too seriously. Is it a waste of time? Yes. But so is the whole spectrum of leisure activities. So crosswords need not be singled out.”

Eugene T. Maleska, Editor and Epithet

Weng’s successor was Eugene T. Maleska, whose name – complete with middle initial – has taken on metaphoric significance among today’s puzzlers. As in Weng’s case, the puzzle editorship was a second career for Maleska, who had been an educator and school superintendent in Manhattan and the Bronx. Long before taking over as *Times* puzzle editor in 1977, he published dozens of crosswords in *The Times*. As puzzle editor, he pioneered “maddening, mind-twisting” innovations like the stepquote, a quotation that ran through the puzzle like a staircase (James Barron). He was also an author of more than just crossword compilations. His book *Crosstalk*, rather immodestly subtitled “Letters to America’s Foremost Crossword Puzzle

Authority,” is a lively and humorous correspondence with solvers who found – or thought they found – errors in the *Times* puzzles. In *Across and Down*, Maleska gave readers an inside look at the crossword puzzle world. And his profound knowledge of the English language and its foreign derivations is evident in his book *A Pleasure in Words*.

But Maleska the educator overshadowed Maleska the puzzle editor. Unlike Weng, who considered the crossword a fun game and saw “no educational merit whatsoever in solving” (Arnot, *What’s Gnu* 124), Maleska became synonymous with an abundance of puzzling pedantry and obscure crosswordese. “As a result, some critics felt that the *Times* puzzle, during Maleska’s tenure, ceased to be the best crossword in the country,” writes puzzle constructor Gaffney. “... It was as if, in contrast to Farrar and Weng, Maleska had an almost adversarial relationship with solvers.” In a further indictment, Gaffney describes Maleska as “a gruff man” who “often veered into outright hostility” with constructors, discouraging many from submitting their puzzles to *The Times* (40-2). “I am sick and tired of your puzzles,” he wrote Liz Gorski, returning all her puzzles after learning she was a rookie (Amende 27). Yes, that’s the same Elizabeth Gorski who created the artful Guggenheim Museum crossword (Figure 1). Maleska was more civil when he responded to the resubmission of my puzzle in 1991 ... with fewer black squares. In what appears to be a form letter, he began: “Dear Constructor: Sorry! Because of a tremendous oversupply of puzzles, I am no longer accepting contributions from neophytes.”

To Maleska, the crossword community was a classroom and he was the teacher. While insisting that he tried to “eschew [smaller] esoteric words” like anoa and moa and Abo, he admitted his goal was to “enlarge the puzzler’s vocabulary” – to teach new meanings and spellings via unfamiliar longer words (*A Pleasure in Words* 405) that were crossed, for ease of solving, with more familiar words. Constructors today do the same, though the vocabulary they introduce tends to favor popular culture over dictionary vocabulary. Many of those strange little words haven’t disappeared; they’re just described differently. For example, “ani” in Maleska’s

day might be clued as “black bird.” Today it would more likely be clued “ ‘Gimme ___!’ start of an Illinois cheer” – in other words, “an i” – or “Singer DiFranco” for Ani DiFranco.

I had no complaints about the puzzle in the Maleska years – I just assumed that having a crossword dictionary by one’s side was standard operating procedure and that any blank spaces in the puzzle were due to my own intellectual lapses. Still on a bookshelf is my old (but not first) *Crossword Puzzle Dictionary*, dated 1985, by one Andrew Swanfeldt, with its ripped cover, yellowing pages and microscopic agate print. It never occurred to me that anyone could do a *Times* puzzle without such a reference. Or that one day we would have something called a Google search engine. In other words, I was no puzzle rebel. But Maleska’s heavy-handed role as teacher created a backlash among younger crossword writers, who were dubbed the New Wave or the “Anti-Maleskas” (Gaffney 43). While Farrar’s mantra had been “Crosswords are intended to be good fun,” Maleska put a different spin on puzzling; he “considered the crossword as a mini-classroom and shunned contemporary terms,” writes longtime puzzle creator, editor and instructor Michelle Arnot in her 2008 book *Four-Letter Words* (28, 32).

That teacher role is evident in his book *Crosstalk*, which contains “a lifetime of admiring, inquisitive, and often cantankerous correspondence from puzzle enthusiasts worldwide,” as described on the cover. The book is amusing but, in retrospect, patronizing. Maleska divided puzzlers into four sectors: Sleepers, who accept the puzzle without question; Squawkers and Quibblers, who take it as a “personal affront” when they cannot complete a puzzle; Leapers, who arrogantly and wrongly point out errors; and Gotchas, the “elite,” who correctly catch him in a mistake and become eligible for a certificate admitting them into Maleska’s Gotcha Club (*Across and Down* 21-8, *Crosstalk* 156-7). By making these distinctions, Maleska shifted the emphasis away from the content of puzzles onto the puzzlers themselves, portraying them as at best those rare mortals who were smart enough to catch him in an error, and at worst as morons or eccentrics to be humored.

This is not to say that Maleska was or is the devil incarnate to all puzzlers. Quite the contrary, wrote Marc Romano in *Crossworld*; “he had built up an ardent following of people who agreed with him that puzzles should mainly concern themselves with high culture and disdain words or phrases that had originated roughly since 1960 ... If you were of a certain age or a cultural snob or raised in or around New York City (or, ideally, all three), he was your hero” (6). A left-handed compliment, to be sure. Thus, the reign of *The Times*’ third puzzle editor, though it ended nearly two decades ago, still serves as a backdrop for debate and divisiveness in the contemporary crossword community – one based on age, class and locale. This is evident in the frequent appearance of Maleska’s name – as verb, adjective and expletive – in today’s crossword blogs. And it was evident at the 2011 American Crossword Puzzle Tournament, where pianist, puzzle constructor and seven-time tournament champion Jon Delfin reprised the now classic “Crossword Puzzle Blues”:

I’ve got those Dr. Eugene T. Maleska blues,
I’m very down,
I’m very cross.

Will Shortz, Rockin’ Pop-Culturist

On Feb. 16, 1992 *The New York Times* – the same newspaper that once dismissed the crossword puzzle as “a form of temporary madness” and “a primitive sort of mental exercise” – devoted a special section of its Sunday Magazine to celebrating “in prose and puzzles” the 50th anniversary of admitting the crossword into its hallowed pages. In “An Addict’s Tale,” author Jesse Green’s paeon to the puzzle, it is evident once again that not every puzzler was put off by crosswordese and Maleskan jargon. To Green, the *Times* puzzle was an invitation to both the familiar and the esoteric: “Come inside my New York apartment, it says: come visit a parallel Sunday universe of Aleuts and emus, yaks and Slavs, an odeon in which actress Merkel is starring forever in Capek’s ‘R.U.R.’...” That parallel universe, even with its shortcoming and critics, retained its following. In fact, the arcane vocabulary was something of a password to the club.

A little more than a year later, the American puzzle world faced a huge jolt. In May 1993, Will Weng died. And three months later, Eugene Maleska – in his 16th year as puzzle editor – also went to “that big crossword grid in the sky” (Romano 7). Both men, avid cigar smokers, had been suffering from throat cancer (Severo, James Barron). Farrar had died in 1984 so there was no editor emeritus to fill the gap. In October 1993, *The Times* selected Will Shortz as its new puzzle editor. A 41-year-old Baby Boomer “upstart” (Feigenbaum 14), Shortz was two decades younger than either Weng or Maleska when they began their puzzle editorships. And puzzling was not his second career or avocation. From his home in Indiana, the same state that Weng hailed from, Shortz had sold his first puzzle at age 14 and become a regular contributor to Dell puzzle magazine by age 16. At Indiana University he designed his own bachelor’s degree in enigmatology, the study of puzzles, and – ignoring the law degree he earned from the University of Virginia – began work as an editor at a puzzle magazine, first at Penny Press and then *Games* magazine, which had more sophisticated fare than other puzzle magazines and was directed at a younger audience (Amende 125-6).

But the big excitement in the crossword world was the *Times* puzzle’s move, under Shortz, from its heritage of stodgy, obscure, dictionary-dependent clues to the New Wave approach: more conversational language, less crosswordese, and a shift to pop-culture references, even brand names. Shortz also gave constructors a boost by increasing pay and adding their bylines to the daily puzzles.

Today *The Times* crossword is considered the foremost American newspaper puzzle. Its longevity – what Gaffney calls “the heft of history” (36) – and its strict adherence to quality, tone, suitability and, under the Shortz regime, modern innovation and popular culture references have kept it in the forefront. Add to that the aura of exclusivity and intellectuality surrounding this crossword, and you have the formula for its cult status. As one blogger noted: “if a puzzle can be ‘branded’ then the *Times* crossword is the Coca-Cola of puzzles” (Brown). Gaffney echoed this elite, pop-soda branding: Solving a puzzle that is not from *The Times* is “like having a rum and

Coke made with RC Cola – even if you like RC Cola, you’re still not drinking a real rum and Coke” (35).

In less metaphorical testimony of its prestige, the documentary *Wordplay* presented a parade of celebrities addicted to the *Times* puzzle. Equally telling is celebs’ reaction to actually appearing in the puzzle’s vaunted grid. “Oh, man, that’s called the pinnacle of our career,” said Emily Saliers of the Indigo Girls, referring to the first time the folk-rock duo’s name was the answer to a *Times* crossword clue, in 1993. “It was a thrill, a total thrill” (*Wordplay*). Opera singer Beverly Sills, also an avid puzzler, said, “You are never famous until you’ve had your name in a crossword puzzle” (Shepard). She meant the *Times* puzzle, of course. And Rahm Emanuel’s mother “screamed so loudly that [her husband] Benjamin came running down the stairs believing a robber had broken into the house” – not when her son was elected mayor of Chicago in 2011 but when his name was the answer to 25Across, “Chief of staff in the Obama White House,” in a 2009 *Times* crossword. A copy of the framed crossword is on the mantel of their Chicago home (St. Clair).

Nipping at *The Times*’ heels are other clever, innovative puzzles – by constructor/editors like Merl Reagle, Peter Gordon, Ben Tausig and “BEQ” (Brendan Emmett Quigley) – and even X-rated crossword books like *Crasswords: Dirty Crosswords for Cunning Linguists* by Francis Heaney. But most of these constructors also contribute puzzles to *The New York Times*. And the *Times* puzzle is the default setting for most crossword discussion. After nearly two decades as *Times* puzzle editor, Shortz is the face and voice of crosswording – in TV and print interviews; in the documentary *Wordplay*, which debuted at the Sundance Film Festival in 2006; as the puzzlemaster on NPR’s *Weekend Edition*, and as the author of hundreds of crossword, Sudoku and Ken-Ken puzzle books. He founded, in 1978, and hosts the annual American Crossword Puzzle Tournament, a gathering that for puzzlers is as much a piece of Americana as its current Brooklyn Bridge-area locale. He began the World Puzzle Federation in 1992, hosts the annual gathering of the National Puzzlers’ League and attends other puzzling conventions around the

world. He is also readily accessible to the media, whether for a routine interview or his response to a puzzling controversy. Unlike the understated Weng, quietly presiding over occasional insider



Figure 8. Merl Reagle (left) and Will Shortz in *The Simpsons*' "Homer and Lisa Exchange Cross Words."

lunches, or the fearsome Maleska, Shortz has “built around crosswords a thriving, very active, and very social community of solvers and constructors” (Romano 11). Early on he brought a taste of crossword culture to the American public by hobnobbing on TV with such pop-culture staples as Oprah and Conan O’Brien. And in 2008 he made a toon-ish appearance, with constructor Merl Reagle, on *The Simpsons* (Figure 8). Clinching the mixed-media power of the crossword, Reagle’s bodacious *New York Times* puzzle that Sunday (11/16/08) had two hidden messages that tied into the Fox TV sitcom. Another *Times* crossword, on Oct. 26, 2010, became fodder for *The Colbert Report* when it was themed to Jon Stewart’s Rally to Restore Sanity and Stephen Colbert’s March to Keep Fear Alive.

Thus, despite his very un-rock-star appearance, Shortz is perceived as “the only rock-star level celebrity in crosswords” (Gaffney 33). But it’s hardly all glamour. Shortz selects *The Times*’ seven weekly puzzles, often re-clues them and suggests changes, farms them out to “beta testers”

– that is, test solvers and fact-checkers, sends out tactful but emphatic rejection letters and works with young constructors (Romano 176, Gold). All of these puzzle-oversight tasks are roles that also fell to Shortz’s predecessors. The big difference, as noted by puzzle editor Jim Page: For Weng and Maleska, “Every word in the grid should be look-uppable somewhere: dictionary, geography [book], movie lists, song lists, somewhere. Verifiable. Period.” But not so much for Shortz. “You don’t go to the dictionary to find AIR BUBBLE – you won’t find it. You don’t go to the dictionary to find SEE YA. With Maleska and Weng, you’d say, “God, what the hell is this Celebes island?” (Amende 36). These changes are now entrenched in crossword puzzles.

What was likely not anticipated in 1993 was another new wave, a tsunami, that has also engulfed the puzzling world. I’m referring, of course, to the digital revolution. On blog sites, puzzle editors and constructors are subject to a new degree of fan involvement that Shortz’s predecessors were spared – or missed out on, depending on the point of view. Shortz already was a pivotal figure in the crossword community, not just as *New York Times* puzzle editor but through the annual American Crossword Puzzle Tournament that he founded and hosts. But in this blog-eat-blog world, his editorship has shifted into the public eye. And just how that shift changes power, community and authorship in the puzzling world is played out every day in web sites devoted to the *Times* puzzle, as will be evident in the next two chapters.

CHAPTER 3

CROSSWORDS: THE COMMUNITY

*The chatter subsides to a murmur. “On your mark, get set, go.”
The words of New York Times puzzlemaster Will Shortz reverberate
through the sound system, and the flutter of 700 crossword puzzle sheets
being flipped over gives way to silence.*

– “Across and down: Clued in to crossword mania at tournament,”
Stamford Advocate, March 25, 2007

To the outside world, the annual American Crossword Puzzle Tournament is what the crossword community looks like – hundreds of puzzlers coming out of their so-called solitary shells to share a weekend of competition and camaraderie. Marc Romano’s book *Crossworld* describes this “energetic geekfest” as a cross between a high school Math Olympiad and “the swallows flocking at San Juan Capistrano” (11). The tournament has been a fixture for *New York Times* puzzlers for 36 years, described in a seemingly endless array of newspaper and TV features and spawning regional competitions around the country. It has become even more iconic through the crossword documentary *Wordplay*.

That said, it would seem logical to frame any discussion of the crossword community around the national tournament. Certainly it has been a key factor in making the solitary and quotidian pursuit of solving crosswords a communal activity. As Will Shortz said in a 2011 NBC interview, puzzlers tell him that going to a convention is “like finding a lost tribe.” But despite its popularity and longevity, the tournament brings together just a fraction of puzzling’s large solving base. And it is a once-a-year occasion. In contrast, the internet offers a strong injection of daily, unrelenting grassroots fervor and feedback, adding a new dimension to puzzling. So I have chosen to focus on the online participation and input of puzzling fans, primarily through crossword blogs. My goal in this paper is to show how an involved, interactive 21st-century puzzling base is reshaping the structure and business of crosswords today.

This change is yet another manifestation of the ever-growing influence of the internet, a medium that allows people who once were just an audience to be producers as well as consumers. “Every time a new consumer joins this media landscape, a new producer joins as well because the same equipment – phones, computers – let you consume and produce,” Clay Shirky said in 2012 on NPR’s TED Radio Hour. “That is a huge change.” To Shirky, that makes the media a site for both innovation and socialization “because groups that see or hear or watch or listen to something can now gather around and talk to each other as well ...”

Even without the expertise of social media observers, we see for ourselves the growing voice, allure and power of the internet in everything from political insurrection to musical flash mobs, from fan fiction to video games. This is mirrored in the relatively small but ardent world of crossword solvers. The virtual community of puzzlers exemplifies the sort of social networking and community building that arises today, via the internet, through any shared interest. The content of crossword blogs is a revealing reflection of fans’ love of the challenge along with their challenge to authority, their concerns about puzzle quality, how they set about building a community and the generational disputes that mark the discourse on crosswords today.

Still, without the sense of community that the American Crossword Puzzle Tournament brings to puzzling, the online discourse might never have gotten its start. Or have the impetus to continue. The tournament is both competition and love fest. Its mix of tribal spirit and intellectual foreplay made it an ideal setting for the documentary *Wordplay*, which intersperses the competition with close-up interviews of host Will Shortz and lesser puzzling immortals like Bill Clinton, Ken Burns and Jon Stewart. The documentary also features top-ranking contestants like Ellen Ripstein, who demonstrates her other area of expertise: twirling a baton; Trip Payne, playing pinball and kissing his boyfriend at their Florida home; and the very middle-American family man Al Sanders, whose claim to fame at the 2005 tournament was (*spoiler alert!*) that he left two crossword squares blank in the final puzzle, costing him the championship.

But the “star” of *Wordplay* is the tournament itself. To some degree, the script follows the pattern of *Spellbound*, the 2002 documentary about a spelling bee: looking behind the scenes at the participants’ eccentricities and the sometimes dreary practice involved in becoming a mind-game champ; then splicing in the action and tension of the contest itself. Twirling a baton, flubbing the playoff puzzle, watching President Clinton whiz through a *Times* crossword – these are colorful, even memorable moments. They add more than a touch of human interest to a pastime that, like chess and bridge, is not easy to convey to the outside world. I have to admit some uneasiness when *Wordplay*’s creators, Patrick Creadon and Christine O’Malley, gave us a sneak preview of their new film at the 2006 tournament. Was this a documentary or a mockumentary ... an exposé of a bunch of word nerds? But Shortz and my fellow puzzlers all seemed delighted with the film.

The tournament was still held in Stamford, Conn., when the documentary was filmed in 2005. Held now at the more spacious Brooklyn Bridge Marriott, the event is a weekend of fun, games ... and stress. Its centerpiece is two days of competitive puzzling, with scores based on speed and accuracy. A large time-clock looms over the ballroom where we hunch over our puzzles, behind yellow cardboard petitions, at long tables. Those who make the playoff do the final puzzle on giant grids that face the audience, with an ESPN-like play-by-play.

The ACPT convenes each year in chilly February or March. And while constructors, editors and bloggers make themselves available to their admirers, the assembly tends to break into cliques and solos: Contest judges and officials, most of them puzzle pros, hang together; past winners like redhead Tyler Hinman and towering Trip Payne, easily recognizable to regulars, form mini-posses; ambitious contestants do practice puzzles in the hotel lobby, sometimes with stopwatches. Occasionally there’s a celeb guest like Ken Jennings, the all-time champion of the TV quiz show “Jeopardy!” Then there’s the rest of us, like all contenders sporting our powder-blue (or mint-green) name tags and wandering about, hoping to get a moment with friendly, punctacious constructor Merl Reagle or a handshake or photo op from an affable but busy Will

Shortz. As the weekend goes by, we too form our mini-posses. And between puzzle-contest rounds in the ballroom, we check out vendors selling crossword books and paraphernalia, share horror stories at the bar (“I left three-quarters of Puzzle 5 blank!!”) and pretend not to care that we rank in the bottom 200.

Certainly the ACPT embodies the sense of community that compels puzzlers to spend time (a Friday-Sunday weekend) and money coming together. In 2012, the registration fee was



Figure 9. Decked out in crossword regalia.

\$180 but add meals, a two-night hotel stay and, in many cases, transportation fare, and the cost escalates quickly. The registration packets give some insight into competitors: name, city and state of residence, occupation, solving division (from expert to rookie), age range and number of times contestants have competed. While most live in the greater New York area¹⁴, they are a geographically diverse group: 236 of the 592 puzzlers in 2012 came from across the country and a dozen from Canada and overseas – Denmark, Saudi Arabia and Australia. These puzzlers are a mix of ages and genders, with occupations ranging from airline pilot, doctor and computer

¹⁴ Including upstate New York, Long Island, New Jersey and Connecticut

programmer to political consultant, theater producer, architect and stay-at-home dad. Many, like me, are retired. Another 70 or so – set apart by their yellow name tags – are officials, judges and referees.

The tournament is both contest and reunion – a siren call to serious puzzlers. We participants are like guests at a big party, enjoying a planned program of entertainment, competition and socializing; a puzzle party with just a touch of puzzle chic. Yes, some participants wear their love of crosswords on their sleeve, or other parts of their body. I have a crossword scarf. Others have hats, ties, earrings and other paraphernalia with the familiar black-and-white puzzle squares; even crossword nail polish. One top puzzler is known for wearing her lucky crossword pajamas during the competition. And Jim Jenista, author of the naughty *Banned Crosswords* puzzle book, wears a different outrageous costume every year, from crossword toilet (Figure 9) to pregnant crossword bride. But these flourishes are the exception among the hundreds attending. For the most part, ACPT participants dress down, way down – jeans and tees are common. There’s a lot to be said for comfort when you’re in a brain-straining competition, even one that’s held in an elegant ballroom with glittery chandeliers. Nor do I recall seeing Will Shortz in anything more exotic than khakis and button-down shirts, or shirt and tie. Aside from those conspicuous name tags dangling from strings around our necks, puzzlers milling about the Brooklyn Bridge Marriott lack a distinctive look, either individually or as a group. Nor do we speak in any kind of mysterious crossword lingo. That, as we shall see later, is a contrast to the blog community.

From Ballroom to Blogsville

Of necessity, the tournament is a top-down event, under the guiding purview of Shortz and his coordinator-in-chief Helene Hovanec. Otherwise, it would be sheer chaos. There is a top-downed-ness to the crossword blogs as well; and even the most independent bloggers have ties to the *New York Times* puzzle editor. But the blogs are a revealing portal into the modern puzzling

community. In “Why We Blog” (2004), Bonnie A. Nardi et al offer five major motivations: “documenting one’s life; providing commentary and opinions; expressing deeply felt emotions; articulating ideas through writing; and forming and maintaining community forums” (43). All of these factors emerge in crossword blogs, as unlikely as some may seem in a forum centered on solving a puzzle; even the deeply felt emotions.

Specifically, the crossword blogs are a daily happening. For the most part unfiltered, comments and postings are often as spontaneous and heated as tweets and as personal as diaries. With their links to each other and to virtually every other online crossword site, they are like town centers for the puzzling community and more: a psychiatrist’s couch for frustrated puzzlers, an outlet for egos and a one-room schoolhouse for both novices and pros. Furthermore, the multiple roles of bloggers – they are not just fans themselves but constructors and competitors – illustrate the hazy line between industry and audience. Because anyone can weigh in, the blogs are more “democratic” than the tournament – no color-coded name tags and often no names, not real ones anyway. And the blogs are free if you don’t choose to subscribe or toss a few dollars into their virtual tip jars.

Of course, the crossword blogger-in-chief sets the rules and the tone of the discussion, and has the primary and longest say. He or she also has ultimate control of the blog site, and can delete a posting or plant a sharp rebuke. “Hierarchies form online ... Many groups are moderated, meaning that power structures are both explicit and built into the group’s very structure,” writes Nancy K. Baym in her 2010 book *Personal Connections in the Digital Age* (80-1). On crossword blogs, the completed puzzle is usually posted early in the day. That is followed by an explanation of the puzzle’s theme, if there is one, and a rundown of the trickier clues and answers and sometimes a “word of the day,” an obscure one plucked from the puzzle. Typically, the blogs are judgmental – replete with critiques or compliments and whatever else the blogger is moved to write about or post.

Another aspect of the conversation is gamesmanship. What makes great crossword content – the classics or contemporary culture or a balance of the two? Clever and challenging clues? Are rebuses, themes, anagrams, pangrams and other word plays too gimmicky? When is the vocabulary too arcane? Is it cheating to Google a clue? All these construction and solving details and ethical quandaries matter enormously to serious puzzlers, and are fodder for discussion among bloggers, fans and editors.

Assembling the blog is a considerable investment in time – one or two hours a day, according to Rex Parker's Michael Sharp (Coker). Crosswords run daily, and the blogs are usually up-to-date and thorough. Most have the completed grids on their web sites – an issue that apparently skirts copyright laws because while blank crossword grids are protected, in theory at least, “those filled in with whatever letters one chooses and discussing how the clues relate to one's answers are not. It's as much a matter of free speech as any other kind of writing” (Stevenson). Virtually everything is up for discussion or debate – whether the puzzle fits the day's solving standards; its originality, freshness of the theme, the fill (small filler words) and black squares, structure of the grid, the abundance or lack of high-scoring Scrabble letters like x and z, speed solvability, etc. Some blogs are “illustrated” with YouTube videos and photos based, often loosely, on the puzzle's content. In their diary-like approach, the blogger may celebrate his wife's birthday or her son's graduation, or complain about a new crossword fee. This is the blog as memoir as well as critique, pop-culture site, community rallying ground and *agent provocateur*.

Guest posts are encouraged. These are usually stream-of-thought, with comments ranging from terse to rambling, from civil to crass, often using insider jargon that is foreign to non-puzzlers – and that marks the commenters as part of a relatively closed community. In “Harnessing the Hive” (2005), writing about online games, JC Herz calls this a “clan network” – seemingly anarchic but actually efficient and cohesive because of the clan's “set of shared goals.” Transposed to online crosswords and blogs, you find a puzzle world that also is tribal, with its

unique “rites of passage and leadership structures” (336-7) and enemy combatants. Puzzlers may not fight “dangerous monsters” of the MMPOG world like the devourers of *EverQuest* or the dragons of *Dark Age of Camelot*. But they have their own demons to fight, weaknesses like crosswordese and other inferior content, that threaten the quality of their crossword environment; and victories to celebrate when they conquer a tough beast of a puzzle or figure out a tricky theme. How sweet it is to share these battles and victories with other puzzlers. “The functional unit is not the individual; it’s the pack,” writes Herz. “Group cohesion keeps players in the game, as in the real world: Clans, guilds packs, teams, buddy lists, book clubs, the people you forward a joke to – that’s where the leverage is” (337). Add crossword blogs to that list.

The Blog Players

In the next chapter, I will zoom in on puzzlers’ community-building conversation and how it reverberates through the crossword world, focusing primarily on daily puzzles from Jan. 6, 7 and 8, 2012, and comments from the three most long-running and in-depth blogs. I first selected the Jan. 7 puzzle because of a controversy – what I’ll call the Great Illin’ Smackdown – that clearly illustrates the tensions noted earlier. But I added puzzles from the day before and after to ensure that this one puzzle and its blog response were not a fluke. Indeed, I found that virtually any puzzle, from any day, supports my conviction that online fan involvement and community building has become a key ingredient in puzzling. But first, an explanation of the three blog sites I have selected: Wordplay: The Crossword Blog of *The New York Times*, Rex Parker Does the *NYTimes* Puzzle and Diary of a Crossword Fiend. (For clarity, I will underline blog names, capitalize crossword answers and designate blog posters with @ – for example, @qiqi – which is how they usually address each other in postings.) Despite some superficial similarities, the three blogs are quite different in approach and tone. Here is a synopsis:

Wordplay: The Crossword Blog of *The New York Times*

(wordplay.blogs.nytimes.com). This is the official blog of *The New York Times*, with a direct link

from its daily online puzzle site though it can be accessed via an internet search. Quirky, amiable blogger Deb Amlen (her smiling photo is on the website) nearly always gives a positive spin to the puzzle, even when critical of cluing or content. So Wordplay is the blog of choice for those who like their puzzle analysis warmer and fuzzier than the other two blogs, which are independent of the newspaper. It can be too warm and fuzzy for some. In “Switching Crossword Blog Camps,” Jeremy Mercer writes that “when I wanted to vent about an inaccurate clue or nit-pick the use of a word, it felt awkward.” In fact, he adds, “it felt like I had just farted in church.”

Other Wordplay posters seem quite comfortable posting critical comments on the blog, which debuted in 2008, replacing the *Times*’ online puzzle forum. But Amlen acknowledges that Wordplay “has the stamp of approval from *The New York Times*, and traditionally it has

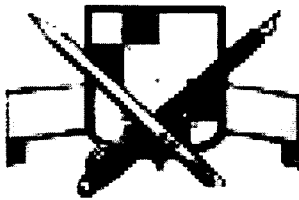


Figure 10. Wordplay’s pencil vs. pen logo.

celebrated the hobby of solving and the construction of that puzzle” (Quora 2011). Shortz does not get involved in her posts, says Amlen, though he is there to answer questions. She also has access to *Times* news resources, “and much more importantly, ... their cafeteria, which has some rocking sushi” (Quora Q&A). And she has access to Shortz and the puzzle constructors, who often post comments, videos or interviews on the Wordplay web site, explaining their techniques, background and other aspects of puzzling. Both fellow bloggers Michael Sharp and Amy Reynaldo have been interviewed by Amlen. Thus, the Wordplay blog offers an extended

experience for the crossword community – insight into its authorship personalities and construction techniques – even as it gives *The New York Times* a bonus feature for subscribers.

A humorist, author and puzzle constructor, Amlen had three puzzles in *The Times* before she took over as blog editor in January 2011¹⁵. Curiously, Wordplay's logo (Figure 10) is iconic of the pencil vs. pen choice to do the *Times* puzzle but fails to reflect more current alternatives: computer solving and smartphone apps.

Rex Parker Does the NYTimes Puzzle (rexwordpuzzle.blogspot.com). Popular Rex Parker is the Simon Cowell of the crossword blogosphere. With commentary that ranges from



Figure 11. Rex Parker's blog avatar.

enthusiastic to slash-and-burn, he is appreciative of what he sees as a great puzzle but show-no-mercy tough when he views a puzzle as too gimmicky or reliant on overused filler words. His solving speed and puzzling insight are daunting. And it's clear from the many posted comments – he says his blog gets 20,000 readers a day (Coker) – that he has a regular following; folks like @optionsgeek, @Glimmerglass, @evil doug, @retired_chemist and @Bob Kerfuffle. And even @VaBeach puzzler, my posting alias, though I'm not one of the 1,593 “members” who join through Google Friend Connect. The blog is supported by voluntary donations.

¹⁵ Statistics on construction frequency are from XWord Info (xwordinfo.com).

Rex Parker is the *nom de crossword* or *nom de blog* of Michael Sharp, a professor of English literature at Binghamton University in upstate New York. His blog, which debuted in September 2006, brings together a knowledge of the classics – his academic specialties are Medieval, Renaissance and Arthurian literature – with his zeal for crosswords and pulp fiction (Coker). Regulars are fluent in Rex-speak: the Natick principle – his taboo, inspired by a town in Massachusetts, for two obscure nouns crossing; Ooxteplernon, “the god of bad fill,” and spoor, aka crosswordese. For newcomers, this insider jargon – what fan-culture scholar Matt Hills calls “just another cultural group’s language” (3) – is explained in his blog’s FAQ.

Interestingly, while Rex Parker does not conceal his real identity and has posted photos of himself and his family, it is not Sharp but his alter-ego Parker, “King of CrossWorld,” who dominates the blog site, complete with an avatar rendering in a sort of sci-fi military garb (Figure 11) – as though unapologetically proclaiming a persona of critical aggression. And, indeed, he has riled Will Shortz on more than one occasion; “I have mixed feelings about him,” Shortz told CBS in 2012 during an otherwise glowing feature on Sharp/Parker. Two years earlier, Shortz had told me that Rex Parker is “too critical of the *Times* crossword,” adding, “but he’s entertaining, people enjoy him, and I think he has increased the quality of crosswords with his blog so, overall ... it’s a plus.” In other words, the good of the puzzle trumps all.

Blog comments do not refer to Michael Sharp or Professor Sharp; he is Rex or Rex Parker or RP. Below the serious mien of his avatar drawing are the words: “I am the 40th Greatest Crossword Solver in the Universe!” referring to his ranking in the 2013 American Crossword Puzzle Tournament. He is also a crossword constructor; six of his puzzles have run, under his real name, in *The New York Times* since 2010. Apparently Shortz does not let his “mixed feelings” interfere with his choice of puzzle constructors.

Diary of a Crossword Fiend (www.crosswordfiend.com). This is the work of blogger Amy Reynaldo, aka Orange. Or über-blogger, as Rex Parker calls her (Rex Parker 4/1/09) since she daily analyzes as many as a half-dozen crosswords, including those from *The New York*

Times, *Los Angeles Times*, *CrosSynergy/Washington Post* and *The Wall Street Journal* as well as online puzzles like Peter Gordon's *Fireball* and *The Onion* crossword. Reynaldo's blog is fairly Spartan – fewer illustrations and YouTube links and no personal memory trips that I've noticed. Also, Reynaldo's own comments are relatively terse, due no doubt to the number of puzzles she critiques, though she gets help from guest reviewers – 13 regulars are listed as Team Fiend. Another difference is her use of star ratings for the puzzles reviewed on her blog site. Based on these ratings, the blog has a list of the 25 top puzzles of the previous year. Like the other blogs, it contains reader comments and links to crossword sites. And like the [Rex Parker](#) blog, [Crossword Fiend](#) is supported by voluntary donations. Generally, I find Reynaldo's commentary less acerbic than [Rex Parker](#), more critical than [Wordplay](#). Or, as Rex Parker put it in 2007, Reynaldo's site is "oriented toward top solvers and mine more toward the everyday schmoe [sic] ..." (Stevenson).

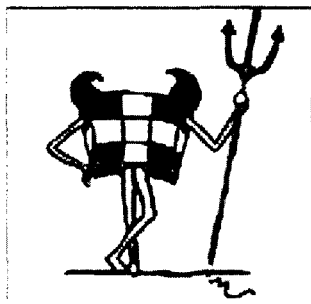


Figure 12. [Crossword Fiend](#)'s fiendish image.

Reynaldo can also claim bragging rights for her prowess at the American Crossword Puzzle Tournament. If Rex Parker's alter-ego Michael Sharp was the 40th greatest puzzler in the universe in 2013, Reynaldo ranked an even more impressive 11th that year. Her blog avatar is a devilish but sassy crossword grid with a benignly satanic trident (Figure 12). Reynaldo is the author of the 2007 instructional book *How to Conquer The New York Times Crossword Puzzle*, written for and copyrighted to *The New York Times* with an introduction by Shortz. There are no photos of Reynaldo on the blog or in her book, which depersonalizes them – perhaps deliberately.

She is serious about her puzzling. As a constructor, Reynaldo had one puzzle in *The Times*. Though not the first puzzle blogger, she is something of a pioneer, launching an online crossword forum in 2004 and then her blog in June 2005, before either Rex Parker or Wordplay. On his FAQ page, Rex Parker lists Orange as “my fellow crossword blogger, without whom this site might still be a backwater.”

Even with their different approaches, these bloggers are aware that they have become a cyber-nucleus for the crossword community. “The good part of criticism about puzzles is not saying whether they're good or bad, but the way it creates talk around something that had been a silent experience,” Rex Parker said in one interview (Stevenson), adding in another, “Before the Internet, crosswords were meant as solitary endeavors. The idea that you could talk to thousands about things in a puzzle, that’s something only the Internet can do” (Lisi).

Reynaldo also hailed the community spirit that blogs engender. “I love the way the crossword blogosphere and the forums that preceded them have made crossword puzzles a social pastime rather than a solitary one,” she e-mailed me in September 2012. “You might be the only member of your family or social circle who's hooked on crosswords, but thanks to the Internet, you can mingle virtually with kindred spirits.”

On the three days that I will be focusing on, Jan. 6-8, 2012, Wordplay had between 63 and 99 posted comments, Rex Parker between 75 and 114, and Crossword Fiend between 13 and 45 for all five or six of its posted puzzles. These numbers include repeat comments from the same posters. For example, on Jan. 7, Rex Parker showed 77 comments (over more than a 24-hour period) but I counted only 53 named or pseudonymous posters, 14 of whom commented two to four times each; another five posts were anonymous. It’s clear that the more heated the conversation becomes, the more often posters re-comment. But these numbers may not mean much. If indeed Rex Parker gets 20,000 hits a day, posters are just a fraction of those who check in. The rest are lurkers – the “most common role in most, if not all, online communities ... the person who reads but never posts” (Baym 87). And I suspect that this “silent majority” abounds

in the crossword blog world. Many probably just want easy and quick access to the puzzle solution; this is available, with the puzzle, on the *New York Times* crossword site but restricted, at least technically, to NYTimes.com Premium Crosswords subscribers. Other lurkers likely check in to have difficult clues explained, to find out if other posters found the puzzle easy or difficult or just to “eavesdrop.” I’m a subscriber but I do a lot more lurking than posting.

Since I began this project in 2010, blogs have come and gone. Ryan and Brian Do Crosswords, a popular blog and podcast, folded in 2011. Jim Horne had his own crossword blog before he was recruited to start *The New York Times*’ Wordplay, a successor to *The Times*’ online crossword forum. His new blog, The Further Adventures of Jim Horne (www.jimhblog.com), does not do a daily crossword analysis but offers a broader commentary on puzzling. As of the summer of 2012, other active blogs include: The New York Times Crossword in Gothic: Life is Shortz (donaldsweblog.blogspot.com), with its goth black backdrop; Not A Blog: Okay Maybe It Is (dandoesnotblog.com), which mostly posts participants’ puzzle-solving times; The Cross Nerd (thecrossword.blogspot.com), part blog, part puzzle site; and WEB’s New York Times Crossword Solution @ NYTCrossword.com, basically a clue-by-clue breakdown of the puzzle, with little other discussion. Puzzle databases include the incredibly detailed XWordInfo (begun by Horne), my source in this paper for statistics about constructors, puzzles and clues, along with Cruciverb and Cruciverb-L, resource/discussion centers for puzzlers and constructors. There are also puzzle blogs with different specialties – for example, ones that focus specifically on the *Los Angeles Times* puzzle or on Shortz’s weekly NPR puzzler on *Weekend Edition Sunday*.

Online Marketplace

The crossword blogs and databases also serve another important function. Through their links, they are pathways to burgeoning online puzzle sites, often independent of mainstream publications. Some of these puzzle ventures went digital when their print publications shrank or shut down. Peter Gordon began *Fireball Crosswords* after *The New York Sun*, home to the print

puzzles he edited, folded in 2008; his puzzles are e-mailed to subscribers. (I'm one of them.) Other crosswords lead dual online-print lives or are online-based only, from the *Los Angeles Times* and *Newsday* puzzles to "indies" like the eponymous *Brendan Emmett Quigley*, Elizabeth Gorski's *Crossword Nation*, Patrick Berry's *Chronicle of Higher Education*, Ben Tausig's *American Values Club* and Bob Klahn's *CrosSynergy*. It is through blogs and database sites that puzzlers find these web sites ... and get the word about other crossword tournaments, like the annual Lollapuzzoola, or the occasional online puzzle contest like the deviously difficult Brain Game Challenge in September 2012, a charity fundraiser.

For puzzlers, this marketplace (or agora, to use a favorite puzzle word) gives the field much-needed diversity. For constructors and editors, alternate puzzle sites offer creative freedom, not to mention other revenue sources. Matt Gaffney got an early start, finding an "edgy new crossword" niche by partnering with crossword author Matt Jones, a "happily married guy who just bought a house and never misses a deadline," and marketing him to alternative weeklies as "a twentysomething, beret-wearin', coffee-drinkin', bands-you've-never-heard-of listenin' hipster" (Gaffney 116-7). Their *Jonesin' Crosswords* are now available online. In addition to his online puzzles, Brendan Emmett Quigley or BEQ (Figure 13) freelances, offering on his website to make "custom-made puzzles for all occasions: birthdays and bar mitzvahs, anniversaries and retirements. You name it. Need a puzzle for your website or your publication? He can do that, too." BEQ's 2012 book *Sex, Drugs & Rock 'n' Roll Crosswords* comes with this disclaimer: "Warning: these are not grandma's crosswords – unless grandma is a foul-mouthed, sex-crazed, puzzle junkie." Another puzzle editor/constructor, Patrick Blindauer, is compiling a Hollywood-themed book, *Wide Screen Puzzles*, its unusual 24x13 grids resembling a wide-screen TV.

Not that diversity is a new concept in crosswords. For years there have been puzzle books and magazines for every solving level and for every occasion, be it a "backyard Sunday," "coffee break" or "weekend getaway." The books come in all sizes, from mini (to fit in a purse or pocket)

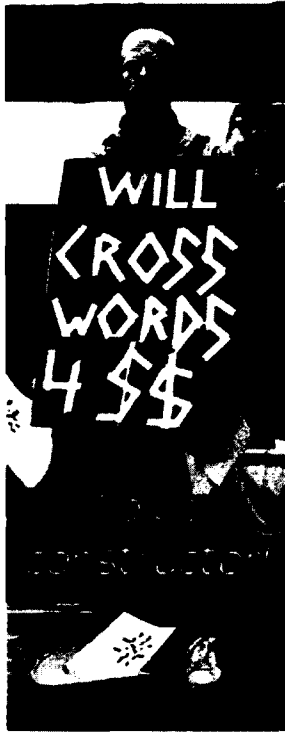


Figure 13. BEQ busking.

to mega; and all skill levels, from “light and easy” to “wild” and “ferocious.” There are puzzle books in large print and puzzle books for children and puzzle books themed to special interests. David J. Kahn has one book for opera lovers, another for devotees of dead celebrities (*The Grid Reaper: 50 Puzzles to Die For*). Merl Reagle, whose Sunday puzzles run in *The Washington Post* and other major newspapers, has been selling his *Sunday Crosswords* books on his own web site for years; at last count, he was up to Volume 17. And Simon & Schuster is still cranking out puzzle books – with, of course, its cover reminder that it is “the original crossword publisher.” So targeting crosswords, itself a niche pastime, to niche audiences is not a new marketing technique. What is relatively new is that the blog has become a virtual marketplace for these products, another way to serve and fortify the crossword community ... and make a living for puzzle makers.

A “Vast Mob of Serfs”

Obviously, the blogs play an important role in promoting and stirring up interest in the crossword. But are their critiques and postings considered an asset, an annoyance or the salvation of modern-day puzzling? Shortz, who said he reads the daily *Times* blogs and some of the comments (Gold), believes their give-and-take has improved the quality of puzzles and piqued interest in puzzling. “In the old days,” he told me, “about the only feedback that puzzle makers got on their work was from the editor, from me. So constructors would send me puzzles. I would reply yes or no but also often with a comment or comments about the puzzle and over time this would improve the puzzle maker’s work, ideally. Nowadays, I’m just one person doing that. There’s lots of people – the bloggers do it, commenters on the blogs do it, and puzzle makers get feedback that way and can improve their work.” Shortz says the blog critiques also help him. “I may not always agree” with the feedback, he says, “but I have to take those opinions into consideration.”

Also, like Rex Parker and Reynaldo, Shortz believes the blogs have created “a community of puzzlers,” stimulating interest in the field. Compared to football, crosswords are a niche interest, he says. So “if you were interested in the NFL, for example, you don’t need the internet to create this niche. You just talk to people on the street and in the office, and there are already tens of ... hundreds of thousands of people who are into this, and you see it discussed on network TV. ... But the internet allows the [crossword] community to get together.”

But Shortz’s enthusiasm for the internet as a tool to bring together a niche community, and enhance its numbers, doesn’t make it a Garden of Eden for a crossword editor. The day I interviewed him in 2010 he was still steaming about what he called a “rant” on the Rex Parker blog over a minor opera clue. It’s a sign, perhaps, that the constant blog scrutiny might expose some nerve endings; and a reminder that with fandom comes fan appropriation. In that respect, the crossword community resembles the “traditional hierarchal structure” described by Alan

Wexelblat in “An Auteur in the Age of the Internet” (2002), about fan appropriation of the science-fiction series *Babylon 5*.

Applying this hierarchy to the *Times* crossword and its blogs, the auteur is Shortz and the “favored fans” might be the blogger-constructor-tournament champion elite, with blog followers – both commenters and lurkers – forming “the vast mob of serfs below that” (225). Here, however, I suspect that the crossword blog leader, rather than the serf followers, poses a greater degree of aggression. The blogger’s expertise, status and involvement in the crossword community add weight to his or her critiques; in contrast, the poster-serfs – while broadening the discussion – are often, but not always, little more than a Greek chorus.

CHAPTER 4

ILLIN' AND CHILLIN'

My goal in this paper to show how cyber-fans use their collective voice to mold and influence a community – in this case, a puzzling community. A close look at the actual crossword discourse on the web provides a picture of this constant volley of feedback. Much of it is complimentary, even effusive. A good deal of it is not. And unlike the letters in Eugene Maleska's book *Crosstalk*, comments are printed without mitigating commentary – whether supportive or explanatory, condescending or defensive – from those who produce the puzzles. Aside from Wordplay, the blogs do not need approval or endorsement of *The New York Times*. And they pull no punches when it comes to assessing and sometimes shredding their beloved puzzles; as Herz put it, “pushing back against the world they've been given” while “the authors of the game are watching, to see where players lead them” (341).

In the crossword community, puzzlers often lead authors and editors down unexpected paths. Take the clamor over the definition of a hip-hop word – an ideal example of fan impact on puzzling and the generation gap, not to mention the complexities of an ever-shifting urban slang. The Great Illin' Smackdown ranked about an 8 on the Richter scale of crossword seismology when it erupted on Jan, 7, 2012. That would place it somewhere between “massive” and “major.” But if you asked puzzlers about it six months later, or maybe even six days later, they would probably draw a blank. And so it goes in the quick-to-erupt, quick-to-die-down world of crossword blogs. Yesterday's furor is today's ancient history. Still, the illin' showdown serves as a rallying point for many of the issues that characterize, and roil, the crossword community and ultimately affect its content.

In that Jan. 7 crossword, a tough Saturday puzzle by Joe Krozel, the clue for 28D (short for 28 Down) was “Wack, in hip-hop.” The answer was ILLIN – or illin', if crosswords used punctuation. The fireworks began that day when blogger Julieanne Smolinski, aka

@BoobsRadley, e-mailed *The New York Times* to say that illin' and wack are "not the same things, at all!" – that illin' has a positive spin. Her protest was picked up by the web site *Gawker*, which reported that "legendary Times crossword editor Will Shortz" responded to Smolinski, thanking her for the e-mail but defending his usage; both clue and answer mean bad or uncool, he said, citing the Dictionary of American Slang, the Dictionary of Contemporary Slang and the online Urban Dictionary (Chen). Smolinski also stood her ground. She replied to Shortz:

This is how I would use illin':

Julianne: Hello, new best friend Will Shortz, how are you today?

Will Shortz: Illin'.

But I think you definitely have supporting evidence. Although, the guy who wrote that American slang guide died ten years ago at the age of Super Old. Not that that should matter! Good lexicography is good lexicography.

The debate spun through the non-puzzling blog world, from *The Atlantic Wire* to *The Boombox*, with a link to the Culture page of *The Huffington Post*. Then it moved to other media. With professorial aplomb, an aging Mike D of Beastie Boys, the white-boy rap group, dissed Shortz's hip-hop cluing on Comedy Central's *The Colbert Report* (Rahman), agreeing with Smolinski that the definition of illin' has changed since 1986, when Run DMC came out with "You Be Illin'" and the Beastie Boys with "License to Ill." Back then, the word mostly meant crazy or even psycho. But by 1994, in Nas' "Illmatic," it meant cool – or maybe crazy cool (Greenfield). "*The New York Times* is behind the times when it comes to slang," *The Atlantic Wire* wrote. Shortz was wacked. Two weeks later, in his role as Puzzlemaster for National Public Radio's *Weekend Edition Sunday*, he conceded that his clue for illin' was "older slang" and that "when illin' comes up again, I'm going to use the more modern meaning." Shortz kept his word. In a Sunday, March 4, 2012 puzzle, the clue for 7A (7 Across) was "Sublime, in hip-hop slang." The answer, of course, was "illin.'" And, as an encore, the 8D (8 Down) clue on a Sunday, Sept. 9, 2012 puzzle was "Awesome, in slang"; the answer: ILL.

So, did the illin' flap shake up the three crossword blogs on the Saturday it ran? Not really although Rex Parker bulleted the clue, observing with a touch of English-teacher pedantry

that “ ‘Wack’ has far more currency than ‘ILLIN,’ ‘ which peaked adjectivally in the mid ’80s.” He also posted a video of Run DMC’s “You Be Illin’.” Reynaldo said she liked the clue. Amlen didn’t mention it at all – at least, not that day. Only a handful of blog posters referred to it. Three days later, in a somewhat defensive Wordplay “special post,” Amlen reported on the flap with the headline: “The Puzzle Master ‘Throws Down’ on ILLIN.’ ” It begins:

In another time, this would have been a private, hand-written exchange between two people. In the age of the internet, however, an e-mail exchange between a reader and crossword editor Will Shortz somehow found its way to the gossip news site Gawker and launched a debate...

Amlen made a point of noting that, in his home office, Shortz has drawers full of letters, “all claiming to have found a mistake in the puzzle,” and that Shortz always reads a few of the more amusing ones at the annual tournament. Entertaining, yes. But in the pre-internet era of earlier crossword editors, peeved or perplexed puzzlers had no recourse but such letters. By my count¹⁶, some 35 letters to the editor concerning crosswords – either commentary or questioning the solution – were printed in *The New York Times* between 1924 and 1980. That’s a generous number, considering the many issues dealt with by *The Times*; but fewer than the number of postings in one day on most modern blog sites.

The hundreds of reader/puzzler letters in Eugene Maleska’s book *Crosstalk* were collected through his 16-year tenure as *Times* puzzle editor. In the introduction, Maleska states that “I considered it part of my job to answer all fan mail” (10). But that is a far cry from sharing this feedback with others in the puzzling community in a timely or inclusive manner. And while Maleska freely admitted his errors – 10 per 40,000 definitions, by his estimate (*Crosstalk* 155) – there is no collective power behind these letters that might have changed his overall approach to editing crosswords. In fact, *Crosstalk* was published in 1993, the year he died. It is a sharp contrast to the very quick trajectory of Julieanne Smolinski’s complaint: exposed on blogs, radio

¹⁶ Through the database ProQuest Historical Newspapers

and TV in just days and corrected, in a puzzle, less than two months later, with Shortz revisiting his approach to urban slang.

Mint or Candy? A Taste of Fan-tagonism

I selected the Jan. 7 puzzle for this study because its illin' dispute is a textbook example of fan pushback propelled by today's easy internet access. It also typifies the outreach to younger puzzlers. Indeed, the illin' incident seems to cover almost the entire gamut of turbulence and resolution in the modern crossword community. But illin' was not much of an issue in the regular blog discussion. Instead, on two of the three crossword blogs, the big question of the day was: Is Certs a breath mint or candy or both rolled into one? And on all three, a major gripe was the plethora of obscure answers in the puzzle.

The impetus for the Certs debate was its 26D clue, "Roll of candy." Echoing the sentiments of other puzzlers, Wordplay's Amlen insisted that "for my money, Certs are breath mints" though she posted a video of the "Certs twins," from an old black-and-white TV ad, proclaiming it "two mints in one." In the Rex Parker blog, @anonymous posted a lengthy history of Certs from Wikipedia reflecting the breath-mint-vs.-candy-mint argument. Does this seemingly frivolous discussion mean anything in the greater context of puzzling and its community of puzzlers? Yes, because the fact that it was a strong point of blog contention on Jan. 7, and not the illin' flap, is a hint of both generational and cultural differences. After all, Certs dates back to the 1950s and is a recognizable product to white, middle-class and middle-aged or older puzzlers – a brand name that evokes proprietary "ownership" and a sense of nostalgia. The word illin', on the other hand, is hip-hop jargon familiar mostly to young puzzlers; to older puzzlers, it can be an uncomfortable, unfamiliar word from the other side of the urban and racial landscape.

Showing that constructors listen to, or at least hear, all this discussion, constructor Krozel wrote on Wordplay, after a detailed explanation of his "mindset" in constructing the puzzle:

"sorry about the CERTS clue distraction that tripped up a few. All said, I just hope it [the puzzle]

was satisfying and fun.” On the illin’ controversy, he later posted: “Ah yes, once again I find myself the unsuspecting instigator of controversy. Let me add that to my tally” ([Wordplay](#) 1/10/12). This sort of interaction between constructors and fans is far from unusual today but puzzlers did not always know their constructors by name. *The New York Times* always had constructor and editor bylines on its Sunday crosswords but, for more than four decades, the daily puzzles had only the editor’s name. As noted earlier, Shortz changed that when he took over in 1993, adding constructor bylines to the dailies. That meant a change in the authorship equation. From laboring in anonymity six days a week, puzzle constructors now shared credit with the editor; or perhaps, conversely, editors shared credit with the constructors.

Even so, as puzzle editor of *The New York Times*, Shortz still commands the pinnacle of the crossword hierarchy. Auteur does not seem too strong a word. The top tier of tournament winners also stands out. But online scrutiny has cast a growing spotlight on puzzle makers, or constructors. As recently as 2005, Marc Romano wrote: “A crossword constructor doesn’t necessarily have to worry about being crucified by millions of a minor mistake; crossword editors do” (14). That’s no longer true. Along with editors, constructors today comprise the celeb factor of crosswords. And if their names are bandied about in blog sites with awe, then it is also expected that they live up to their masterful reputations – another pressure from the fan base.

Judging from blog comments, puzzlers are aware that the buck stops with Shortz. “The clue for EMDEN [“Saxony seaport”] is so wrong that it requires a correction by WS IMO¹⁷,” wrote @Ulrich Wrote on the Jan. 8 [Rex Parker](#). On the Jan. 7 [Wordplay](#), @John weighed in on the Certs debate: “In fact that clue is so wrong I have to wonder if it will be one of Will’s four errors in his year end recap.” These comments specifically cite Shortz’s responsibility for content. Still, blog chatter makes it evident that *New York Times* puzzlers go beyond looking at every crossword as only a Shortz creation. On the Jan. 7 [Rex Parker blog](#), @Simply, Ron pronounced Krozel’s puzzle “Greeeaaaat! Thank you Mr. K. I’ve no comp[l]aints about anything.” @Cheerio

¹⁷ WS IMO = Will Shortz in my humble opinion

went even further: “I thought this whole week was great – the constructors were a pretty rarefied bunch. It started with a Berry, and had a Gamache, a Parrish, a BEQ, a Schmiedeler, and a Krozel. ... Thanks to all of you and Will and NYT for a great week!” @Cheerio was referring to Patrick Berry, Paula Gamache, Allan E. Parrish, Brendan Emmett Quigley, Dan Schmiedeler and Joe Krozel – most of them frequent, highly regarded *Times* constructors. In Diary of a Crossword Fiend, poster @Animalheart gave Krozel four stars, plus an “extra half-star for ILLIN!”

Of course, with exposure comes the critiquing. Never mind that Krozel’s puzzle had eight interlocking 15s – that is, double side-by-side 15-letter answers, horizontal and vertical. This is still a feat in puzzling but today’s discriminating puzzlers expect that and more. “As stunt puzzles go, this one was about average,” wrote Rex Parker, who doesn’t like gimmicks and finds long answers an easy solve. “Passable, but with seriously ugly stuff in the margins.” He was referring to the rest of the puzzle’s contents, and his posters backed him up. Wrote @Mr. Tibbs¹⁸: “That part of the puzzle with SERACS and SINEX and BIREME was bullshit, Joe Krozel. You know it, I know it, the American people know it. The rest was pretty good.” Added @Two Ponies: “I got creamed. But Joe Krozel and I never have gotten along.” A Crossword Fiend poster, @Jordan, scolded Krozel for “duplications, out-of-the-language phrases, tons of crosswordese.”

In all, no aspect of the puzzle failed to undergo intense scrutiny in the three blog sites. And most of the bouquets and brickbats went right to the constructor. Indeed, Krozel took a keelhauling for two nautical terms, CATBOAT (“craft with one mast and one sail”) and BIREME (“Hellenistic-era galley”), as well as for SINEX (“blockage-busting brand), SERACS (“glacial pinnacles”), EHLERS (“longtime ‘Guiding Light’ actress Beth”) and a host of other perceived obscurities. Puzzlers expect a certain degree of weird words or obscure names that depend on acrosses or downs to help them figure out the answers, but not too many. Otherwise, blog chatter accuses the constructor of creating a “Natick,” crossing two obscure proper nouns, or being “Maleskan” or putting the clues “out of my wheelhouse.”

¹⁸ Full posting name: They Call Me Mr. Tibbs because my last name is Tibbs and I teach science

The impact of such fan grumbling – what Derek Johnson calls “fan-tagonism” (Hills 21) – concerns Jim Horne, an early crossword blogger and the original editor of Wordplay. Writing about the “rise of conservatism” in his recap of notable 2011 puzzles, Horne asked: “Why do grids seem less ambitious this year? It could be just coincidence or merely the pendulum swinging back. It could also be that loud voices in the blogosphere inveighing against gimmick puzzles are changing the trend.” He expressed dismay that Diary of a Crossword Fiend not only grades each puzzle but downgrades those with too many junk words, which he sees as necessary “in the service of a delightful theme.” Finally, Horne offered up this musical coda:

My hope is that Will Shortz continues to encourage innovations. We need both the crossword Brahms continuing to polish the classical forms and the crossword Stravinsky breaking all the rules and upsetting the critics and allowing a little (or even a lot of) dissonance along the way.

Ballsy Cluing, Target Marketing

There’s no question that Shortz encourages innovation – or at least flirts with potential controversy. In my early newspaper days, we rather quaintly referred to a story that would make our readers sit up and take notice as a “Hey, Mabel!” – as in, “Hey, Mabel, did you read this?” On May 1, 2010, the answer to the 12D clue “Unmacho features” turned out to be MANBREASTS. That’s quite a “Hey, Mabel!” for a newspaper puzzle that just a few years ago primly clued “bra” as “bikini part,” that still squeamishly avoids referring to certain illnesses and many body parts, and whose mothership publication, nicknamed “The Gray Lady,” has such an aura of propriety that its articles still address people by honorifics like “Mr.” and “Mrs.” Will Shortz was nonchalant when I asked him about it during our phone interview. “Man breasts – there’s nothing bad about that term. It’s fresh, lively, it’s up to date, it’s fun. That the sort of things that should appear in the crosswords.”

Here’s where the blogs offer an added dimension to the puzzling experience – another layer of sharing and learning. A puzzler no longer sits in isolation, wondering what other puzzlers thought of the clue. Were they outraged? Amused? Did they just yawn? That day, Rex Parker

found man breasts “kind of offensive” and wondered what the reaction would be if the clue had been “unfeminine features” with the answer “sagging tits.” RP also thought that “man boobs” was more common usage. Diary of a Crossword Fiend was teasing: “Why, New York Times! You’re so sassy today. I like the term ‘moobs,’ personally.” Another blog, the now defunct Ryan and Brian Do Crosswords, did some hand-wringing: “I think it has the potential to cause hurt feelings and, thus, really has no place in the NYT crossword. On the other hand, it’s entirely possible I’m being too sensitive here.” Wordplay, as usual, took the conciliatory stand: “Solvers are sometimes surprised by what’s allowed in a Times puzzle. GAYDAR caused some recent controversy but *that* word first appeared back in 2005. Will MAN BOOBS ever flop into the grid? Perhaps not, but today we come as close as possible.”

The space between progressive and offensive, between raunchy and “respectable,” can make for a precarious balancing act. But a necessary one to show that crosswords are not dated, that they reflect today’s less restrictive vocabulary. While Shortz says that no one censors his puzzles, “Basically, I keep the Times’ readership in mind, and The New York Times has a reputation of being proper and not offending people. So I try not to offend or alienate solvers. On the other hand I’m not a fuddy-dud, not an old-fashioned person ...” (Gold). No, Shortz is not a fuddy-dud; in fact, he liberally spices up his puzzles. Besides MANBREASTS, *The Times* crossword has had clues and answers like: “create an open-ended view?” (MOON), “stick between the legs?” (BROOM), “large parts of some support systems?” (DCUPS), “subject of a 1982 bestseller on sexuality” (GSPOT) and that old standard, “the ___ mightier ...” (PENIS), as in “The pen is mightier than the sword.” Not quite as “naughty” as some online puzzles but still pretty risqué, by *Times* standards.

With *The New York Times* in the public eye, not much goes unnoticed. In 2001, a Sunday puzzle titled “Homonames” created controversy over claims that its clues had overtly gay sexual innuendos (“Add more lubricant” and “Scratched up leather straps”) and outed homosexuals through homonym-style clues like “Ruins a good book?”(answer: WRECKS READ, for Rex

Reed) and “People who live next to a Y?” (GYM NEIGHBORS, for Jim Nabors). After a pre-publication flap, *The Times* ran an editor’s note stating that no “suggestions about anyone’s sexual orientation” were intended but some papers dropped the puzzle or renamed it (Connelly). In contrast, there was little reaction more than a decade later to the July 18, 2012 puzzle – themed to the “hot-button issue” SAME-SEX MARRIAGE – where each long answer had man/man next to each other, as in TRUMAN/MANDATE (“The Marshall Plan, e.g.”). While that was less explicit than “Homonames,” it also shows that a decade can make a big difference in what is, or is not, acceptable.

Then there was what *The New Yorker* magazine called “the infamous ‘SCUMBAG’ incident of 2006,” which caused the suits at *The Times* to suffer a mild case of apoplexy and led then MSNBC commentator Keith Olbermann to put Shortz in one of his “Worst Person in the World” segments (Gold). Why? Because to a certain generation, a scumbag is not just a “scoundrel,” as it was clued (4/3/06), but also a condom. “To me, it’s really obscene,” *Times* columnist Clyde Haberman was quoted in *The New Yorker* article. “It’s not much better than printing ‘fuck’ ” (Konigsberg). The magazine got into the fray after MID-ASS TOUCH – clued as “Cause of a sexual harassment complaint?” – was an answer in a 2012 Sunday (2/8) puzzle where the theme was adding an extra S to common phrases; in this case, “Midas touch.” Shortz told *The New Yorker* that MIDASSTOUCH “gave me pause.” But then he remembered that Will Weng had rejected one of his puzzles, in 1975, because it had BELLYBUTTON. Times change.

Rap and sexual innuendo are not the only potential pitfalls. In a 2011 article by *The Atlantic* (Hoyt), Shortz explained how he edits puzzles – like cluing SOMBRERO as “A Mexican might sleep under it” (8/10/11). Several posters took offense. “I’m not saying ‘racist’ but tacky, inconsiderate, insensitive?” wrote @consejerodelobos on *The Atlantic*’s web site, with @Tamara Vallejos adding that “the lazy-Mexican-sleeping-under-his-sombrero is definitely considered a racist stereotype by many.” More than a year later (11/11/12), SOMBRERO had quite a different clue: “Kahlúa and cream over ice.” A similar bout of ethnic backlash occurred when ILLEGAL

was clued (2/16/12) as “One caught by border patrol.” That led an editor from *Univision*, the Spanish-language television network, to write *The Times* management that “many people would consider the term, when used as a noun or short-hand for ‘illegal immigrant,’ offensive” (Wordplay 2/20/12). Shortz wrote back that he had no idea the term was controversial and would not clue it that way again.

By that time, Shortz had already defended but held his ground on such answers as GYP (“virtually nobody today associates the word with Gypsies, so no ethnic putdown or offense is intended by the word’s use”), SPAZ (dictionary slang and not meant as name-calling – “that would be cruel”) and JEWFR0, clued “Curly ethnic hairstyle, informally” (a colorful word “widely used by young people”). Shortz explained his thinking on all three in the 7/23/10 Wordplay.

All of this is still pretty tame compared to the vocabulary of independent puzzlers intent on reaching a younger, hipper audience – and no doubt enjoying an X-rated variation on the “Aha!” factor. “These days I am as committed to mild or explicit raciness as I am to contemporary references,” writes Ben Tausig on his puzzle web site Ink Well xwords. ‘Both are about equally important. My favorite clues are ones like ‘It might make you a new person’ for SEX.” Unlike Shortz, indie puzzle-meisters can use answers like VAJAZZLING (clued “Decoration for privates”) and BALLSIER (“More determinedly daring”), and even more provocative clues like “It might have a large cock on it” (the answer was VANE) or “What you put your balls on before whacking them off” (TEES) – all from Peter Gordon’s recent *Fireball* puzzles. Gordon and other indie editors don’t have to worry about being hauled before the court of public opinion. Or about raising the hackles of *The Times*’ unofficial but ever-watchful anti-vulgarity tribunals, like the ones that pronounced judgment on SCUMBAG and MID-ASS TOUCH.

Maleska and the Wheelhouse

Aside from an occasional “Tsk, tsk,” puzzlers themselves – at least, those involved in the blog discourse – are only marginally concerned with sexual and ethnic proprieties. Like Shortz, they enjoy fresh, colorful vocabulary. What riles them is when those fresh, colorful puzzle clues and answers are not in their generational or experiential grasp. @Norm, a Rex Parker commenter, found the Jan. 7 Krozel puzzle “right in my wheelhouse (don’t expect a CATBOAT has one of those)” while Reynaldo told her Crossword Fiend followers that “nautical words are not in my wheelhouse.” The word “wheelhouse” has nautical roots (i.e. the pilothouse of a ship) but its popular usage actually comes from that all-American sport, baseball: the “part of the strike zone in which the batter swings with the most power or strength; the path of the batter’s best swing.”¹⁹ Translated to the crossword world, it often has a negative application: “not in my wheelhouse” refers to a word that is not in the solver’s personal lexicon because it is either too antique or too youth-oriented or too obscure. In other words, not in the path of his or her best swing at solving the puzzle. An occasional synonym is “off my radar.”

Related to that frequent blog complaint, but even more toxic, is the accusation that a word is reminiscent of the Maleska era. As noted in Chapter 2, that reflects former *Times* crossword editor Eugene Maleska’s penchant for salting his puzzles with words that required consulting a dictionary or encyclopedia or thesaurus so puzzlers could expand their vocabulary. @Lewis, a Rex Parker poster, said he still had not mastered “Maleska-isms” like SERAC and BIREME. Over at Crossword Fiend, @Matt was more tolerant of such challenging vocabulary: “I don’t mind that particularly, but maybe it’s a taste I acquired during the Maleska era.”

In general, the blogger-in-chiefs are far less good-natured about such words. Writing about a Jan. 26, 2012 *Times* puzzle, Reynaldo gave it a mediocre 2.5 stars, adding: “Is this one of those puzzles that’s intended to slake the thirst of the faction that still misses Maleska’s style, so that they can’t complain too much when we have funky puzzles that discard convention and

¹⁹ Word Detective, citing *The New Dickson Baseball Dictionary*

include a rapper's name? I feel it wasn't made for solvers like me." Rex Parker doesn't mince words when arcane vocabulary surfaces. "Holy crap, did Maleska come back from the grave for this one?" he wrote on May 5, 2012, the day a *Times* puzzle had QUIRINO, clued as "Philippine province on Luzon." And, on April 28, 2012, he blasted a puzzle with the answers CENTO ("poem comprised of quotations") and HAUSA ("common language of Niger"): "Those are the kind of answers that would've reigned in the Maleska era, the kind that give crosswords a bad name." Amlen is a bit gentler in her potshots at Maleska. Writing about answers like INIMICAL and LAUDABLE in a July 8, 2012 puzzle, she added: "That should make some of the solvers who miss the days of Eugene Maleska happy. I'm kidding, Maleska-era solvers. Please put those sharp pencils away." More than two decades later, the generational wounds still run deep.

In the Jan. 6 crossword blogosphere, the generation gap was even more evident in response to a Friday puzzle constructed by 15-year-old David Steinberg. What raised the most hackles among his elders was 60A, clued "2010 Ke\$ha chart-topper with a creatively spelled five-word title." This generous tip about the spelling – the answer was WERWHOWER ("We R Who We R") – did not un-ruffle feathers. "Young David moved waaaaay outside my wheelhouse in the SE," wrote Wordplay commenter @DeadTree Solver, referring to the southeast or lower right corner of the puzzle where WRWHOWER sat atop another youth-oriented answer, MARIOKART ("series of Nintendo games"). @Phil Calbi grumbled on Wordplay that the puzzle's overabundance of pop-culture answers "makes it seem like this whole thing was put together by a committee of junior high schoolers." And @Z, calling on Rex Parker's god of bad fill, branded WERWHOWER a "one answer ooxteplernon. Yuck." Other comments echoed these sentiments, with @evil doug dismissing the "rap crap" and @John V calling the "rap thingy ... way off the charts."

In a society where incivility is associated with a younger generation, a good deal of it surfaces here from older puzzlers. Others just miss the good, or bad, old days. "My dear grandfather, who would be over 100 if he were still alive, mourned the ending of the Maleska era

because the new editor allowed too many modern names and references that he just didn't know," posted @MaryRoseG. "Whew! I felt the same way today when I had to ask my 12 and 14 year old daughters to help me with ke\$ha and Nintendo titles." Young constructor Steinberg was unapologetic in the face of this adult scolding. "Thanks, everyone," he wrote on Wordplay, "— sorry some of you weren't able to finish in a jiffy, but I M WHO I M!"

Ironically, the complaints were not entirely about youth-oriented pop culture content. "High" culture also took a hit. The clues "Dove ____ (Mozart aria)," answer SONO, and "Russian ballerina Galina," answer ULANOVE, had blog commenters in a snit. @Joon (crossword constructor and "Jeopardy!" champ Joon Pahk) posted on Diary Fiend that "I think you really do have to be an operaphile to know SONO. It's not the name of an opera, a composer, a librettist, or a major character." That evoked a riposte from @Bruce N. Morton, who pointed out that "Dove Sono" – from Mozart's *Marriage of Figaro* – is "one of the soaring monuments of western culture." He added: "What upsets me is the idea that this entry is outrageously outside the bounds of what is reasonably expected in a solver, when one is expected to know every bizarre rapper, rock group ...[and] 'second' place finisher on an idiot *American Idol* show."

To Derek Johnson, who has studied the interaction between TV shows and audiences, this sort of involvement and conflict is not unusual. Fandom, he writes in "Inviting Audiences In" (2007), is more than a financial investment; it is an investment "in time and in emotional affect." Thus, fans develop a feeling of ownership in the product. "This can bring them into antagonistic relations [not only] with the producers who manage these asset worlds, but also fans with competing visions for future development of an intellectual product" (74).

Among crossword fans, the competing visions spring from age and cultural experiences. That puts constructors under pressure from opposing camps – the young and the old, the pop-diva lovers and the opera-diva defenders. In a motherly way, Deb Amlen used her Wordplay platform to encourage constructor Steinberg to continue bridging that gap:

So, congratulations, Mr. Steinberg, for being a young man of the world, and to your parents for helping you be that way. It really gives me hope for the future that our young people are not limited to art and culture references from only the last five years.

The Community of Crossword USA

“There comes a time in every frazzled parent’s life when he or she hears themselves saying things that in the heat of battle sound, if not mentally deranged, then at least unlike anything they might say when adult company comes over.” Thus begins a three-paragraph tale by Deb Amlen – about her son and daughter running around while eating mozzarella cheese – that forms the bulk of her Wordplay crossword commentary on Jan. 8. The story showcases her whimsical storytelling ability; it goes on to tell us that she’s a mommy whose children are no longer toddlers. But it only marginally relates to the theme of that Sunday’s puzzle. This is the blog as memoir, a site where even serious puzzlers cannot resist opening their hearts and lives to fellow puzzlers. It occurs when a clue or theme sets off a nostalgia trip or memory or just a piece of daily routine that weaves the puzzle into one’s own life experiences. This comes up over and over in the crossword blogs.

All Sunday *New York Times* puzzles have an overall theme, and the theme that day was “Doing without” – a clue to puzzlers that the word “with” was out or removed from deliberately clichéd answers like “DON’T PLAY [with] MATCHES,” “PASS [with] FLYING COLORS” and “KEEP UP [with] THE JONESES.” It reminded Amlen of yelling at her children: “No running with cheese.” What did her posters think of this tenuous detour into her personal life? Several gave it a thumbs-up: “That might just be the best comment you’ve written since taking over Wordplay,” wrote @John. “It was funny, touching, relevant and something all parents can relate to.” Others launched into their own memory trips. It prompted @Sue to post her own mommy story about her now 43-year-old son. And @linda murray wrote: “ ‘Don’t run with cheese!’ I love that, Deb!” Plus she had her own personal link to the puzzle. Besides a fondness for the constructor, Tony Orbach, “I love this one an extra amount because it mentions Colin Firth. And I

love Colin Firth,” she wrote. The clue for 47A, “Don Quixote’s love” (DULCINEA) sent @fivethirtyam on a different memory trip: “This puzzle awoke lots of performance memories for me. I saw Richard Kiley in the first year of Man of La Mancha in the mid-60s I think. Terrific.”

This sort of dialogue takes us from the solitary pastime of filling out a puzzle to hearing a group of mommies and others using a crossword blog as a life-sharing medium. “Convergence doesn’t just involve commercially produced materials and service ...” writes Henry Jenkins. “Our lives, relationships, memories, fantasies, desires also flow across media channels” (17). As Amlen herself has noted, “People read Wordplay because it's like a cocktail party, where you can discuss not only the day's puzzle, but any topic that the puzzle inspires” (Quora 8/25/11).

Even on the less sentimental Rex Parker blog, memories flooded in on Jan. 8. Some were traumatic. 4D “Glen Canyon Reservoir” (answer: LAKEPOWELL) sent @ArtO back 30 years to a gale-force storm on Lake Powell while he was in a small powerboat with his family.

“Fortunately, the storm abated and we somehow found our way back. Definitely one of the most harrowing experiences of my life.” @foodie recalled a scary incident when “my daughter lived very near the UN in NYC (where you PASS FLYING COLORS)” and a security guard aimed his sniper gun at her. For the literati, a more benign memory-tripping clue was the non-theme 71A, “Who wrote ‘A true German can’t stand the French, / Yet willingly he drinks their wines.’ ” The answer, GOETHE, sparked a good deal of discussion on the pronunciation of the German poet’s name and led to a childhood memory for @Dalums: “The park where I played as a boy was Schiller Park, and there was a statue there of Goethe and Schiller. Not only did I call him “GO EETHEE” for many years, but I also assumed the two were generals (who else gets statues in parks?)” It doesn’t necessarily take a clue to prompt bloggers or posters to reach out though they often embed puzzle answers in their comments. “Saw Tinker, Tailor, Soldier, Spy yesterday,” wrote @quilter1, turning movie reviewer. “Excellent, cryptic, don’t blink. I’m still MULLing over some of the characters.” MULLS was the answer to 113A, “ponders.”

In the Jan. 6 puzzle, 29A “letters signifying quality brandy” (VSOP) sent Rex Parker bloggers on a nostalgic bender as well as a lesson in mixology. “I was a bartender years ago so VSOP was a gimme for me. I loved that job, I studied all the time, I read every book about cocktails I could get my hands on,” wrote @Tobias Duncan, who went on to recall making vodka at a ninth-grade science fair. That led @loren muse smith to recall her cocktail waitress days in the late 70s, the “good-ole days of Rusty Nails, Rob Roys, Gimlets, and Gibsons!” Not to be outdone @JenCT and @anonymous provided differing theories on the significance of the abbreviation “VSOP.” This conversation hits a number of different buttons: socializing, memory tripping, demonstrating expertise and high-class tipping. Once again we are reminded that puzzle clues and answers become personalized to each of us in a unique way; and that we feel a compulsion to share that experience with others who share that zeal. Says Baym: “Online fans and hobbyist groups exemplify this [social integration], as their very existence is predicated on a desire to organize around common interests for social and recreational purposes” (83).

Another element in this people-to-people conversation is the helping hand. Often, stumped puzzlers openly ask for an explanation to certain answers and more seasoned puzzlers are quick to offer help. For example, @jadag88 posted on the Jan. 6 Rex Parker: “I still do not understand how GOAT means attack. Can any of you explain that?” @Dirigonzo to the rescue: “GO AT = attack.” Baym calls this “social capital,” referring to “the resources people attain because of their network of relationships” (82). On Jan. 6, the answer to the 1D clue “18-footer, maybe,” JUMPER, confused @Karen: “is it referring to a broad JUMPER? It shouldn’t be a dress...” she wrote on Crossword Fiend. @David responded without a smart-aleck rejoinder: “Karen – I think 1D refers to a jump shot (jumper) in basketball.” While blog posters sometimes wage verbal war with each other, such queries are usually handled with civility – a nice example of netiquette, or courteous behavior on the internet.

For the most part, I have not seen a lot of puzzler-to-puzzler flaming on the crossword blogs; that is, “extremely argumentative communication” that includes swearing, insults and

name-calling (Baym 51, 57). While posters often disagree with each other, they usually do so with some restraint. There is less restraint when comments and tweets are directed at the puzzle's editor or constructor. "Ok. Just figured out the NYT crossword theme," wrote @briangrosz (6/20/10) on Rex Parker's weekly Twitter roundup. "Holy dogfuck that's not nice, Mr Shortz. Not nice at all..." The gloves are also off on other less-monitored blogs. "Will Shortz is due for an asswhooping," said a comment on squareshare.blogspot.com (12/28/07). "Did anyone try this fucker? I'm used to Saturday puzzles being near-impossible to solve, but this one was ridiculous..." Considering the aura of intelligentsia long surrounding *The New York Times* and its puzzle, this verbal graffiti – though not pervasive – is a bit shocking. At the 2012 tournament, one regular poster told me he regretted the decline of civility in the blog discourse.

Words Taking Shape

It is no surprise that the wordsmiths who do puzzles, and blog about them, create a community through words. But images, music and even performance art also play an important role. Liz Gorski's Guggenheim Museum puzzle is just one example of the crossword as art form. Documentary filmmaker Ken Burns understood that association when, in the documentary *Wordplay*, he compares the puzzle grid to the urban landscape of New York City. "You know it's all about boxes. You live in a box, and ride in a box to go to work in a box, and here we have this wonderful newspaper that is boxy-shaped that has in it this page ... which in one corner says 'Crossword' and there are a set of boxes in which you kind of practice the wordplay of this particularly exquisite language" (86).

In a Sunday puzzle themed "Getting in shape" (10/16/11), answers like ARTIFICIAL HEART, ARCTIC CIRCLE and DIAMOND NECKLACE also form those shapes in the grid. Actual yin-yang symbols dominate a Sunday puzzle grid (11/17/11), with answers (like SUMMER BREEZE and OLD MAN WINTER) situated in the appropriate symbols. Follow the instructions and a Christmas-y Gorski puzzle (11/25/11) becomes a gingerbread cookie. And one

of my favorites, a summer-time puzzle (7/3/11), turns into the drawing of an ice-cream soda – matching its clues. Some puzzles fold into origami and other shapes.

This close association between word and image is reflected in the blogs as well, from blogger and poster avatars to the blog illustrations and videos that spring, often obliquely, from the puzzle itself. These might be dismissed as trivial, an adornment common to most blog sites. But for a generation used to the lively color displays of everything from computer sites to TV and movies, they are almost a necessary component.

Some examples: For the Jan. 6, puzzle, the answer to 3D “Hung in there” (STAYED THE COURSE) prompted Wordplay to post a video of comedian Dana Carvey doing his impersonation of George W. Bush, who propelled the phrase into comic infamy, while Rex

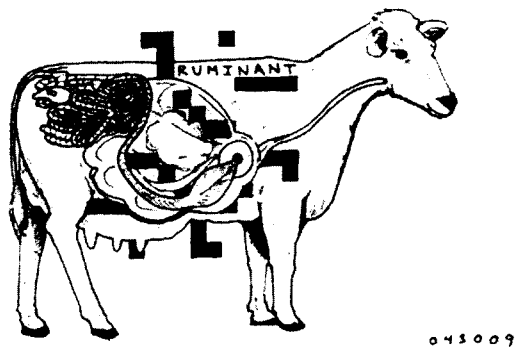


Figure 14. The crossword as art form.

Parker had a video of Ke\$ha singing the puzzler-controversial “We R Who We R.” On Jan. 8, Wordplay posted the YouTube video of Volbeat’s “I Only Wanna Be With You” as a nod to I ONLY WANNA BE YOU, the answer to 117A, “Imposter’s excuse?”, and Richard Kiley singing “Dulcinea,” the answer to 46A, “Don Quixote’s love.” That day Rex Parker posted video of U2’s “With or Without You,” a tribute to the puzzle’s “Doing Without” theme, as well as Wes Montgomery playing “Round Midnight,” the musician whose first name was the answer to 118D. But Rex Parker also took the oblique route with a photo of singer-songwriter Leo Sayer, sparked

by 7D “Constellation whose brightest star is Regulus” (answer: LEO). This sort of stream-of-thought blog illustration is not unusual. If we can leap from word to word in puzzles, why not from words to images?

Bloggers and posters are not alone in attaching their own unique imagery to puzzles. For several years, artist emjo (Emily Jo Cureton) did pen-and-ink drawings inspired by one or two answers in the *New York Times* crossword (Figure 14). One of her 2008 drawings is hanging on my wall; I bought it at the American Crossword Puzzle Tournament. Built around the word “fugue,” it turned the puzzle grid into a musical staff, with the black squares resembling notes. To me it symbolizes not just the logical transition from crosswords to art but from crosswords to music and other sensory experiences.

“Speaking” Crossword Online

In puzzle circles, much has been written, and griped, about the use of crosswordese – words and abbreviations, names and foreign references that come up over and over again in puzzles (Oreo and obi, SST and SSN, Esai and Esau, été and etui, to name a very few) because they are useful fillers or connectors to larger words and phrases. The database xwordinfo.com has a list of the top 500 most popular crossword words. But there is another type of crosswordese: the lingo or vernacular of crossword blogs. Language creates a “social context akin to community,” writes Baym – language specific to the community’s insiders. These terms and phrases not only are “markers of insider status and hence help to forge group identity”; they may also validate a “shared love of the genre, self-representation as intelligent, and their shared frustrations” of outsiders’ perceptions of their group (77-8). Broadcasting this genre-specific vocabulary, as Rex Parker does on his FAQ, is a way of welcoming others into the community. But implicit to newcomers is that if you want to be one of us, you need to speak our language. And crossword-blog language abounds. I’ve already made references to such terms as wheelhouse, Naticks and Maleska-isms. Here are others from my Jan. 6-8 sampling, some inspired by texting shorthand:

In the Rex Parker blog on Jan 6, @chefwen wrote: “a big DNF for this chicklet...” and @Tita added: “This was a challenging DNFWOG for me.” That’s Did Not Finish (the puzzle) and Did Not Finish Without Googling – or perhaps Guessing. @retired_chemist wrote: “HTG [Had To Google ... or, again, maybe Guess] a lot. Too much outside my sphere of knowledge.” On Jan. 7, @jae had “plenty of write overs,” a reference to erased or otherwise changed answers, while @wood “loved the interlocking 15’s,” the 15-letter answers that crossed each other. And on Jan. 8, @JaxInL.A. lamented: “The NE corner killed me completely. I had a malapop by putting in style for Model, then getting STYLIZE elsewhere for that stick figure thing. ... So big DNF for me.”

No, the reference above to “malapop” is not a misprint. In her 2006 book *Word Fugitives: In Pursuit of Wanted Words*, Barbara Wallraff writes that crossword constructors like to invent neologisms, or newly coined words, for thematic puns, like CAIROPRACITOR for the clue “Egyptian expert on posture” and FIZZICIAN for “a dispenser of carbonated remedies (22). But neologisms have also infiltrated blogspeak. While Rex Parker is responsible for much of the crossword blogging lingo, “malapop” – from malaprop or misuse of a word – was coined by puzzle constructor Andrea Carla Michaels in 2008 as “a word that you’ve popped into the puzzle or that has popped up, albeit it in the wrong place.” That is, it applies “when you write in an answer at, let’s say 1A and have to erase it because you discover it’s wrong, only to find out that it’s the right answer at [an]other place in the puzzle, let’s say 17D.”²⁰ What is the appeal of such a misplaced word? Perhaps, as Jesse Green wrote in 1992, there is “something deeply satisfying in the knowledge that errors as much as truths could be made to fit in the pattern. Everything has its place in a puzzle, and the place is communal.”

Blog posters’ names may also be crossword-specific. On Rex Parker, @I skip M-W is telling us that this puzzler refuses to bother with the easier Monday-to-Wednesday crosswords, while @Rookie is self-explanatory. On Diary Fiend, @klew archer may be referring to his or her

²⁰ Rex Parker 11/2/11 and 1/26/12

prowess at piercing difficult clues. And on Wordplay, there's @DeadTree Solver, suggesting a preference for doing puzzles on paper rather than online, and @Xword junkie. But these are in the minority. Most puzzler blog posters use all or part of their real names; these blogs are not, after all, sites for pornography or politics or matchmaking. Some posters pick aliases that reflect other interests in their lives (i.e. @ArtLvr, @cyberdiva and @quilter1), place themselves geographically (@sanfranman59 and @Rich in Atlanta), tell us their professions (@MD solver, @archaeoprof and the breathtakingly long @They Call Me Mr. Tibbs because my last name is Tibbs and I teach science), display personality quirks (@evil doug and @Mean Old Lady) or stress their insistence on remaining nameless (@Masked and Anonymous).

To Baym, identity is essential in creating online relationships. "In textual media," she writes, "the use of written language is a significantly more powerful source in making and forming impressions than it is when people interact body to body" (109). That applies to the crossword blogs but for an additional reason. In this area where clues and definitions are so important, bloggers and posters need to demonstrate, to themselves and each other, their nuanced proficiency with words.

Personally Connected

Bottom line is that puzzlers find not just answers but a piece of their lives in the puzzles they solve. And it is not enough to find this link; they must also share it with fellow puzzlers, personalizing the crossword so that the acrosses and downs crisscross into their lives and touch others as well. Such community-building is familiar to those who study web sites. The title of Baym's book, *Personal Connections in the Digital Age*, says as much. While some fear that the digital age threatens "the sanctity of our personal relationships," she writes, for others "new media offer the promise of more opportunity for connections with more people" (1). Sure, we expect friendship and socialization from Facebook. But a crossword blog? It turns out that the link of a shared interest can enhance such ties.

To video game developer Jane McGonigal, optimal human experience comes from satisfying work, the experience or hope of being successful, social connection and “meaning, or the chance to be a part of something larger than ourselves” (49-50). For ardent puzzlers, the humble crossword can satisfy all four of these intertwining “intrinsic rewards.” While McGonigal is writing about multiplayer video games, her findings easily apply to the online crossword community. “Compared with games, reality is lonely and isolating,” she writes. “Games help us band together and create powerful communities from scratch” (172).

In comparison to the relatively colorful American Crossword Puzzle Tournament, blogs might not be material for the big screen. But they are rich fodder for a ground-level look at the everyday folks immersed in puzzling. We see that in the praise, complaints and challenges to authority, namely the crossword editors and constructors; in the struggle to keep crosswords in the puzzlers’ generational turf; in the use of a shared interest, puzzling, as a medium for sharing life experiences; and even in the unique language and imagery of online puzzle bloggers. The history of puzzling shows that this is not a new experience. From its start, the crossword both created and attracted its own community. It was never quite the solitary pursuit that it appeared to be as evidenced by the flurry of letters and crosswords to early puzzle editors, the attraction of tournaments and even that “Honey, what’s a seven-letter word for ...” cry for help. But there’s no doubt that technology has accelerated and intensified such feedback. In this Age of the Internet, the crossword community has more than a unified, noisy presence; it has something close to lobbying clout through blogs and other online media.

CONCLUSION

AT THE CROSSROAD

At the 2012 American Crossword Puzzle Tournament, one of the 592 contestants – Dr. Fill – was a rookie celebrity. He wasn't the type to hang around the hotel bar or browse through the puzzle books on sale. This contestant was a computer program created by Matt Ginsberg, an expert in artificial intelligence. But Dr. Fill didn't do as well as his IBM predecessors – Deep Blue, who trounced chess champion Garry Kasparov in 1997, and Watson, a “Jeopardy!” victor in 2011. Stumped by his algorithmic inability to process bizarre crossword humor, Dr. Fill came in 141st at the ACPT (well above my own ranking). “It's nice to know,” wrote Anthony John Agnello in *Digital Trends*, “that, despite the advances made in AI development ... [w]e can still kick computers' asses at crossword puzzles.”

Humorless or not, computers and other forms of artificial intelligence may get the last laugh. As print journalism dwindles, it is innovative programming and internet web sites that could keep crosswords alive and thriving – not just through the puzzles themselves but through their flourishing cyber-communities. Today's puzzlers can still pick up a copy of *The New York Times* from their driveway or neighborhood Starbucks, and enjoy the crossword in splendid seclusion – if they so desire. But Americans are at a crossroad in recreational and intellectual pursuits. We cling to our “old-fashioned” printed and bound books, with their artsy covers and page-turning appeal, yet we succumb to the ease and appeal of online reading through Kindle and other electronic text systems. Likewise, changes in journalism are unfolding at warp speed. The familiar feel of newsprint, and the smeary printer's ink that we love to complain about, is yielding to the convenience of calling up the latest news – targeted to our special interests – on our laptops and smartphones. The crossword puzzle has been a staple of the American press for nearly a century, but it may only be a matter of time before the newspaper version is as extinct as that bit of crossword fill, the dodo.

It's clear that the community that sprang up almost at the inception of the crossword, the community that helped craft the ultimate product and held on steadfastly through the decades and now flourishes in the 21st-century blogosphere, remains a crucial factor in its future economic success ... or failure. It is a complex assemblage, a cultural convergence of fans and creators, editors and marketers, critics and cheerleaders. In typical 21st-century style, all of these can be embodied in one person – or in a roomful of people.

By its continued participation and support, the crossword community will be a key element in determining whether the crossword can survive the transition from paper to computer, smartphone apps or whatever electronic delivery systems emerge in the years and decades to come. Will Shortz has expressed his reservations about the appeal of crosswords without the daily printed paper. But he believes that the lively, outspoken feedback characterizing today's blogs is improving puzzle content and construction, keeping puzzle makers on their toes and raising the stakes for new and more creative puzzles. Not everyone is optimistic. In 2009, writer-editor-professor Anne Trubek wrote on the web site *GOOD*: "Of course we can come up with digital ways to do crossword puzzles, and we have, but should we? Or are crossword puzzles like, say, pinball, a game that will be eclipsed by new ones with fancier bells and whistles, and [one that] makes more sense for the digital news delivery device soon to come?"

True, the crossword could be eclipsed by more modern and more interactive videogames. It doesn't offer up the neurotically aggressive angry birds of *Angry Birds* to spitefully sling at pigs. Or the robotic assassins of *Call of Duty: Black Ops II*. There are no sound effects or 3-D action (yet) in the puzzle grid. But the crossword has a powerful and stubborn pedigree, dating back in history to the word squares of ancient Greece and Rome. It has survived the doomsday forecast of an eminent sociologist, the condescending dismissal of a leading flow scholar and the out-and-out scorn in the 1920s of *The New York Times*, the same newspaper that not only set the standard of excellence for the crossword but has come to value the economic value of its Premium Puzzles. In late 2012, *The Times* redesigned its puzzle page, adding new navigation

techniques, colorized grids and more bonus puzzles. But the real bells and whistles are visible only to the truly dedicated puzzle fan, one who savors the challenge of solving a fiendishly clever mystery, who has no trouble making the leap from culture to pop culture and back again, and who finds beauty and depth in its pageantry of words and phrases, history and literature.

That's not to insinuate that the true lovers of the crossword puzzle are a roundtable of effete intellectuals whose critiques and analyses resemble a book club gathering at high tea. Quite the contrary. These same fans are quick to laugh out loud at a delightfully punny or raunchy clue, and pour out expletives when the going gets too rough or obscure. Just as in its early days, the crossword mixes the elite and the indiscreet, high culture and high camp. The 21st-century fan base that has grown up around the puzzle can be euphoric and lavishly complimentary, cynical and disparaging, demanding and forgiving ... its participants often as noisy as the vuvuzela, the South African horn blasted at soccer games ("stadium ear piercer," as it was clued in a 9/28/12 *Times* puzzle). And they express themselves through the blogs, tweets and other online exchanges that, at this moment at least, form the crux of the crossword community.

In short, social/critical networking has become an added dimension that has transformed puzzling into a virtual group enterprise – a noisy online family whose bantering, bickering and rejoicing is centered around love of the crossword. Crossword bloggers are the head of this family. They are a bit like the judges on *Dancing With the Stars* or pundits analyzing a presidential election. Their critiques not only raise the standards of crossword construction but give novices a greater appreciation of the pastime; provide a forum for more advanced puzzlers to share their appraisals, solving techniques and judgments; and offer a social gathering place for those with a common interest. That is not to negate the long history of crossword fandom, from its earliest days, and the ardent enthusiasm of crossword club members and contest contenders. But the clubs and contests always catered to a select few, often with little regular contact among participants. Certainly not the day-to-day, even hour-to-hour, interaction that is possible through the internet.

Hopefully I have shown in this paper the increasingly vital, and revitalizing, role of the online crossword community – even with its plethora of cyber-chatter and occasional bouts of cyber-hostility. Critical or complimentary, the blogs serve an important service for the future of crosswords by focusing on this pastime in real time, keeping the conversation going and thus the interest in participating. In fact, the attention is a rush of adrenalin for puzzling. But while crossword fans have always been a responsive group, never before have so many made their voices heard so loudly and quickly – as is the case with all internet conversation today.

That pushback poses a challenge to puzzle editors and constructors. And it leaves us with many questions that only the future will answer: As blogger Jim Horne fears, will the intense scrutiny lead puzzle editors and constructors to overreact and stifle their own creativity? Could the contentious wrangling between younger and older puzzlers create an unbridgeable rift in the fan base? Can *The Times* puzzle, with its need to meet the respectable context of its mothership paper, keep pace with the youthful, often ribald, freedom of indie puzzlers? That is, can Will Shortz keep up with the *Jonesin's*? And will dedicated and insightful bloggers like Rex Parker and Amy Reynaldo burn out under the weight of long, daily feedbacks, leaving a huge void in the cyber-community? (*The Times*' Wordplay blog is less precarious since it offers a salaried position.)

All of this matters because with the decline in print journalism – as I write this, *Newsweek* magazine has become the latest to abandon its print weekly – the future of the crossword is indeed at a crossroad. It still appears in virtually every sizeable daily newspaper in the country. But we don't know how many print newspapers will survive the decade or even the year. That *The New York Times*' digital circulation has outpaced its print circulation is testimony to the enormous change in news delivery. And that has direct implications for the crossword puzzle, once a bonus feature of print newspapers and now a force in its own right. Only a successful transition to the internet will ensure that crosswords stay alive as a business venture. And success for the crossword's online future depends to some extent, maybe to a large extent, on

the continued enthusiasm of the cyber-community with its lively conversation and social networking. It also depends on the economic backing of the community. Unsanctioned free access to crosswords could divert today's brainy, creative puzzle-makers to more lucrative outlets for their talents. And failure to build a steady subscriber base could eventually silence bloggers and database managers; after all, hours spent analyzing crosswords and overseeing blog sites are hours that could be spent on a paying job. These are all areas to re-examine in the years to come.

Amazingly, the word FUTURE has only been used once since 1993 as a *Times* crossword answer, and the clue was "It could be perfect." I'm not naïve enough to expect perfection. But my immersion in puzzling, and its blogs and databases, has given me some reassurance about the fate of crosswords. I foresee many years of top-notch puzzles like the ones that appear today, in print and online, in *The Times*. How ironic it would be, though a huge loss for journalism, if the crossword puzzle outlives *The New York Times* as it once did *The New York World*.

For the moment, the cyber-community is providing support and feedback at a crucial time, and using its collective clout on the content and business of puzzling. Only the future will tell whether the crossword stays in our collective wheelhouse.

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GLOSSARY OF CROSSWORD TERMS

This glossary applies to the *New York Times* puzzle and related blog sites. It is adapted from: *The New York Times* puzzle site, *How to Conquer The New York Times Crossword Puzzle* by Amy Reynaldo (4-6) and the FAQ section of the blog [Rex Parker Does The NYTimes Crossword Puzzle](#), as well as other sources.

ACROSSLITE – An online software format, created by Litsoft (Literate Software Systems), allowing puzzlers to solve online.

CLUE – A hint that the solver must interpret to find the answer. It is numbered to correspond to across and down spaces in the grid.

CONSTRUCTOR – The person who devises a theme, designs a crossword grid, fills the grid and writes the clues. His or her byline is printed with the puzzle.

CRUCIVERBALIST – Same as constructor.

CROSSWORDESE – What Rex Parker calls SPOOR, “horrible little words that appear in crosswords all out of proportion to the frequency with which they appear in ordinary human speech.”

DNF and DNFWOG – Did Not Finish (the puzzle) and Did Not Finish Without Googling.

EDITOR – The person who selects crosswords for publication, edits clues to comply with house rules, accuracy, the intended level of difficulty and personal preference, and polishes the fill as needed.

FILL – Words and phrases that fill a grid.

GRID – The diagram of black and white squares. Most daily puzzles are 15 x 15 squares; most Sunday puzzles, 21 x 21.

JAVA APPLET – Software that, at the online *New York Times* site, allows a puzzler to either play against the clock or collaborate and chat with another puzzler in solving the crossword.

KEYING – The placement of letters in the grid so that they form a word, phrase or abbreviation. A stand-alone letter – one that appears in only a single entry, across or down – is unkeyed.

LITZING – Converting old puzzles, previously available only as PDF files, into AcrossLite files so they can be solved online. The word is a derivation of Litsoft, creator of the AcrossLite software.

MALAPOP – A play on malaprop referring to a word that you’ve written in as a puzzle answer, then erased, but that turns out to be a correct answer elsewhere in the puzzle.

MALESKA-ISM – An obscure word that requires a dictionary, named after the late *New York Times* crossword puzzle editor Eugene T. Maleska, who favored enlarging puzzlers’ vocabularies.

NATICK – A Rex Parker-ism criticism for the crossing in a puzzle of two obscure nouns; inspired by one that included the small Massachusetts town of Natick.

OOXTEPLERNON — Another Rex Parker-ism for “the god of bad short fill.”

PANGRAM – Puzzle that uses every letter of the alphabet at least once.

REBUS – A crossword square filled by a picture (say, a triangle or square), symbol (such as @ replacing the letters AT), a sequence of letters or a word.

SYMMETRY – Standard crosswords have 180° rotational symmetry, though occasionally left/right symmetry is used or symmetry is abandoned for a special grid construction.

THEME – Longer entries that have something in common with one another. In the Sunday puzzle, the title is a clue to the theme. Daily puzzles are untitled but can still be themed.

THEMELESS – A crossword with no theme entries. Most Saturday puzzles, the most difficult, are themeless.

UNKEYED – Letters that appear in only one entry, across or down.

WHEELHOUSE – A person’s area of expertise²¹ or knowledge. In crossword blog discourse, “not in my wheelhouse” refers to clues or answers that are from a different generation or simply obscure to the solver.

²¹ <http://www.urbandictionary.com/define.php?term=wheelhouse>

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Undergraduate degree: Bachelor of Arts, Cornell University (August 2009)

Professional experience: journalist (reporter and editor), 1967-2008

For more than 40 years, journalism was my profession. I “apprenticed” on a high school newspaper in the 1960s, then on the *Cornell Daily Sun* during my undergraduate years as a comparative literature major (Class of 1964). After returning with my husband David to Puerto Rico, where I grew up, I worked at a tourist magazine, the *Caribbean Beachcomber*, and later *The San Juan Star* newspaper. Stateside, my husband’s marine biology career took our growing family to different coastal cities ... and me to different newspapers before we settled in Virginia Beach. It was a fulfilling and fulltime career, while raising two children. In 2002, I lost my husband to ALS (Lou Gehrig’s disease)..

By the time I retired from *The Virginian-Pilot* in 2008, I had been a copy editor, reporter and editor in news, features, business and editorial departments. But there was one bit of unfinished business: my undergraduate degree. I had taken leave of absence from Cornell in 1963 at the end of my junior year, and never returned. Some 45 years later, I was readmitted. In 2009 I got my bachelor’s degree.

Though I’ve reported on numerous topics, one stands out in relation to this paper. Will Shortz had been named puzzle editor of *The New York Times* but no one seemed to notice. Wanting to do some consciousness-raising, I wrote “Bill Clinton of the Crossword World” for *Editor & Publisher*, a trade magazine for the press. The two-page spread ran on Dec. 4, 1993. It was with some gratification and amusement that when I did a ProQuest search on Shortz for this paper, that article was the first to come up. But just to be clear, I have no personal association with him other than the photo-op hugs he grants me, like this one from 2013.

