

Doodle or Die: A Players' Meta

by mav

User contribution is the progenitor of meta. A simple game like tic-tac-toe has only one goal, and when played “correctly” has only one outcome: a draw. Rock-paper-scissors, when played randomly over several iterations, yields a 50% chance to win. These games are inherently balanced and meta-less when played with perfect adherence to the ruleset. Meta is formed when players begin to consider strategies that circumvent or extend beyond the base game mechanics. For example, rock-paper-scissors players might begin to consider psychological tactics to predict and outplay their opponents rather than relying entirely on guesswork. With the rise of online games that undergo constant balance changes, meta has become a more prominent influencer in the form and function of games as a whole. I investigated the community of *Doodle or Die*, a browser-based drawing game, for evidence of how communal player interaction within and surrounding a game curates a meta. *Doodle or Die* originally inspired series of drawings and captions which were novel and humorous because of the limited context that participants were provided, but feature requests to the developers as well as subcultures within the player community have greatly affected the way the game is played today. I will provide a brief overview of the functionality of the game along with historical context and exposition on how community interaction has shaped the game over the years.

Form and Function

Doodle or Die is a collaborative web-based game with purely user-generated content. *Doodle or Die* was created by Dylan Green and Aaron Silverman in 2011 for the [Node Knockout](#) competition, a just-for-fun challenge for teams to create web apps using Node.js within 48 hours. Despite being unable to allocate more than 8 hours to the project, Green and Silverman were able to win the Node

Knockout award for “Most Fun”, which immensely boosted the game’s popularity. *Doodle or Die* self-proclaims to be the traditional party game of [Telephone](#) (whispering a phrase to someone who then passes it on) but with drawings. Indubitably, the game is derivative of both Telephone and traditional drawing games such as Pictionary.

The concept is simple: the first player begins a game by either doodling a picture using their cursor or by writing out a short prompt for the next player to draw. If they doodle, the image is shown to the next player who must then briefly describe the doodle. This description becomes a drawing prompt for the succeeding player to doodle. If a player is presented with a text prompt, they doodle to the best of their abilities with the rudimentary drawing tools. *Doodle or Die* features an HTML5/Javascript canvas upon which users can draw using a limited color palette and a pen tool of varying widths (fig. 1). There is no eraser tool, so one must correct a mistake with undo/redo or by simply drawing over it. Compared to *Doodle or Die*, even the original Microsoft Paint program looks like a sophisticated and extensive illustration tool. Users can upgrade to a “Super” account for \$9/yr which yields an expanded color palette and the ability to view time lapses of doodles as they were drawn by other players.

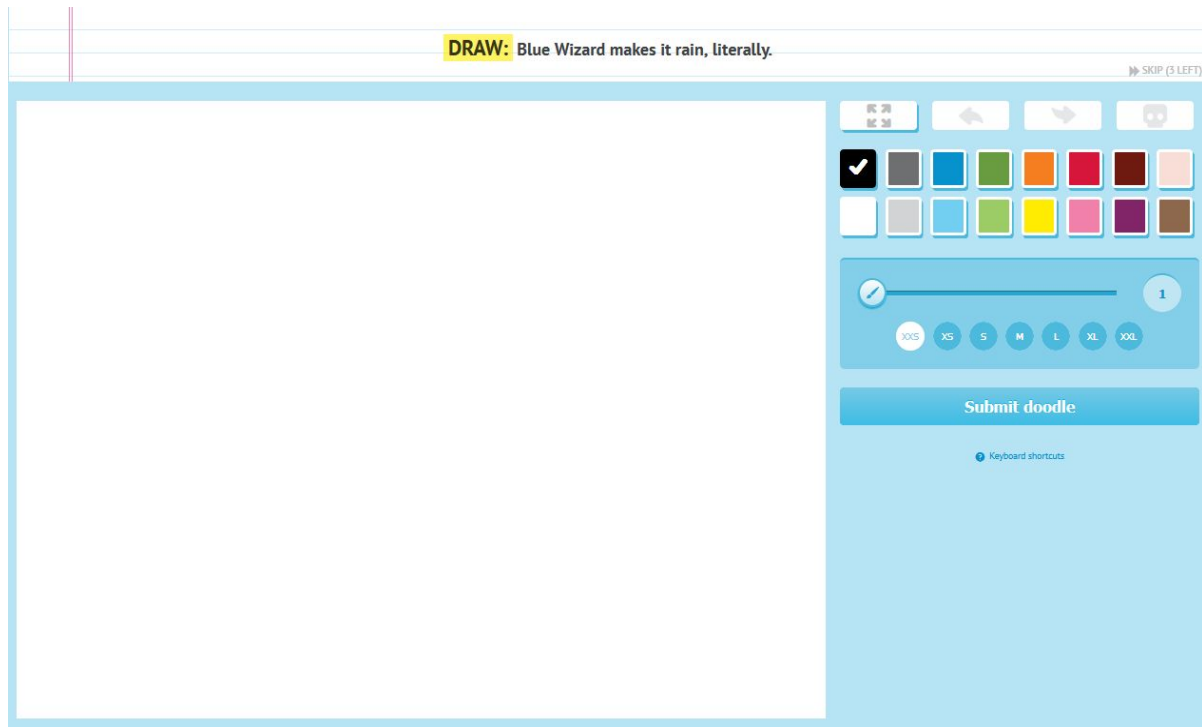


Figure 1. The doodling canvas that users interact with using the tools shown in the right hand panel. A prompt is shown at the top, which the user attempts to draw. The user has no way of knowing the contents of the previous iterations in the chain until after pressing submit. Users are allowed to skip prompts that they are not fond of at a rate of 3 skips per hour.

Why do players draw on *Doodle or Die*? If the goal is to create good artwork, there are surely better platforms than the extremely limited toolset users are provided with. It logically follows that players on the website have ulterior goals to just creating drawings. [Miguel Sicart writes](#) that playing a videogame “implies interacting with a computer system with the purpose of achieving an experiential goal” (3). Meanwhile, Bernard Suits writes in [The Grasshopper](#) that “playing games is different from working,” (36) implying that games have more to them than simply accomplishing a goal. For example, while putting a ball into a hole, there are many methods which can be prioritized by efficiency, yet Golfers agree to utilize a metal rod to hit the ball into a whole several hundred meters away, thus agreeing to abide by a game’s rules. In his own words, “playing a game is the voluntary attempt to overcome unnecessary obstacles” (20). What experiential goal do *Doodle or Die* players pursue? We can see that the players voluntarily agree to the challenge of creating artwork with a

limited toolset, not unlike how a master painter might challenge themselves to work only with a ballpoint pen. There is a certain novelty that comes with restricted utility, such is evident with the nostalgic popularity of pixel-art games which reminisce of days when pixel art was all game developers were reasonably capable of.

Doodle or Die compares itself to Telephone because each player is only allowed to see the previous entry in the “chain” and therefore does not have complete context for their prompt. This creates an environment where each player gives an honest attempt to accurately continue a chain of drawings and descriptions. After 18 entries (9 doodles, 9 descriptions) in a chain, or an undetermined amount of time has passed without a new entry, the chain finishes and is preserved on the website with its own unique URL (fig. 2). All users of the website, whether they participated or not, are able to view the chain, “like” specific entries, or leave a comment at the bottom of the page (except in the case of private rooms). There is no winning or losing in the game, but entries and chains that receive the most likes are featured as best of the day, week, month, and all-time. Receiving praise and recognition for one’s work is a primary motivator for performing well at *Doodle or Die*, where performance consists of artistic prowess, wit, and relevancy.

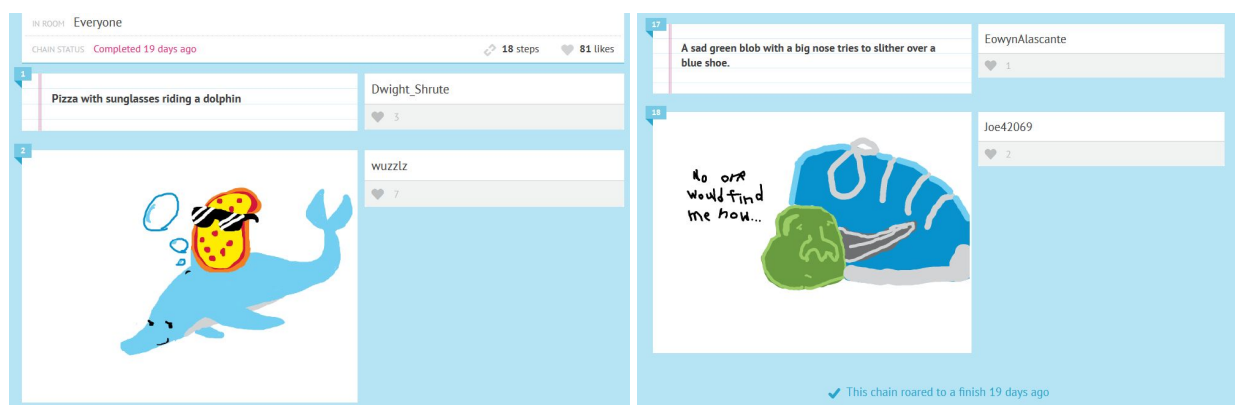


Figure 2a, 2b. The first and final entries in a completed chain. The room in which the chain takes place is listed at the top left of 2a, along with the completion date, total steps, and total likes.

Though the *Doodle or Die* website itself lacks any substantive social media elements, users have profile pages with a portfolio of their past drawings and captions. The portfolio contains a record of how many total steps they have contributed and how many total likes they have received site-wide. There are no explicit score mechanics in *Doodle or Die*, but players often treat this step-to-like ratio as a personal rating and challenge themselves to raise it. Users can also become fans of other users in order to show support and to see their new steps from a syndicated “followed players” filter. In addition to player profiles, the website features “rooms,” which are divergent categories with various topics or themes to the chains within them. For example, there is an anime and video games room for users who enjoy drawing popular characters and wish to doodle from anime or gaming related prompts (fig. 3). Rooms can be public or invite-only, encouraging both grandiose communities that might aim for widespread recognition or smaller communities that thrive on in-jokes and private narratives. The variation in communities that have arisen because of this feature is not unlike the adaptive radiation that Darwin chronicled in the Galápagos; the meta for each community within a room will evolve differently.

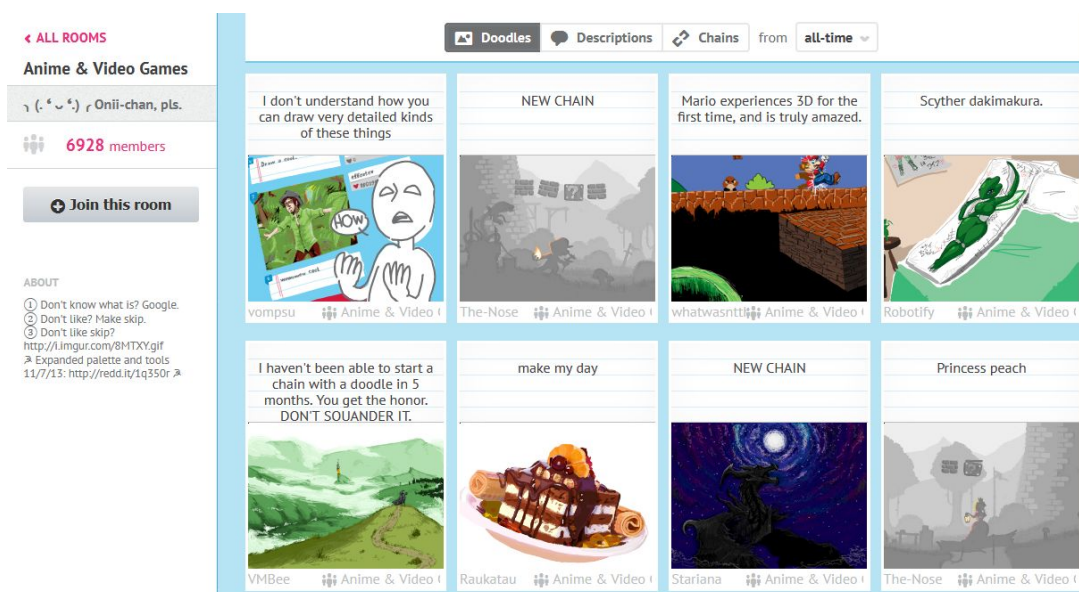


Figure 3. The “Anime & Video Games” room. In the left-hand panel is a total count of the room’s members, along with the room creator’s rules for participating. In the main view are the top doodles of all time for this specific room.

Breaking the Chain

Richard Garfield wrote in [Metagames](#) that “a game without a metagame is like an idealized object in physics. It may be a useful construct but it doesn't really exist” (2). Where then, is the meta within *Doodle or Die*? The explore page (fig. 4a) of the *Doodle or Die* website is a gallery view of the doodles from all over the website, but primarily sourced from the “Everyone” room, which is the default room in which anyone can participate. The gallery sorting filters are set to display the top-liked doodles of the day in descending order, meaning that the first thing a visitor sees are doodles which are both fresh and of higher quality. This publicity can generate more likes and propel a doodle into the top-liked of the week, month, or even all time (fig. 4b). Because of the potential for fame and recognition, reaching the top-liked of the day section can be considered a personal goal or win condition for some players. It naturally follows that players will develop strategies and techniques for gaining likes on their steps in a bid to become popular or obtain a high step-to-like ratio, and thus a meta is born. For players, one can maximize their probability of receiving a like by making their steps clever and relevant to the rest of the player community, similar to how the funniest, most informative, or most interesting content rises to the top of Reddit. Unlike on Reddit or other social media, it is not possible to merely upload a drawing image to *Doodle or Die* and hope to garner attention. There is no plagiarism or reposting, as all doodles must be created in the game using the drawing canvas. This means that the most reliable way to capture attention and merit likes is to put lots of effort into a doodle.

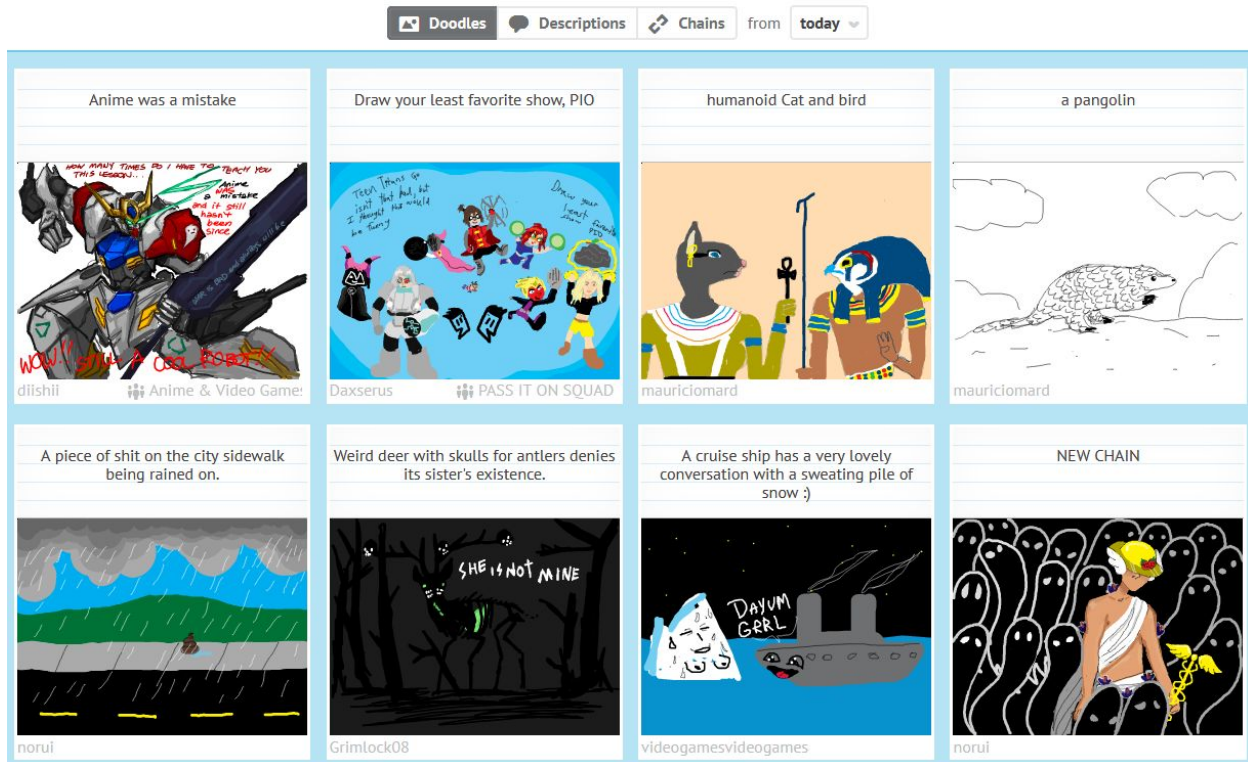


Figure 4a. The explore page shows the top doodles of the day by default. Above each doodle is the text prompt that the doodle was drawn *from*, not to be confused as a description of the doodle. Below each doodle there is the doodler's username to the left and the name of the room that the doodle chain belongs to (if different from the Everyone room).

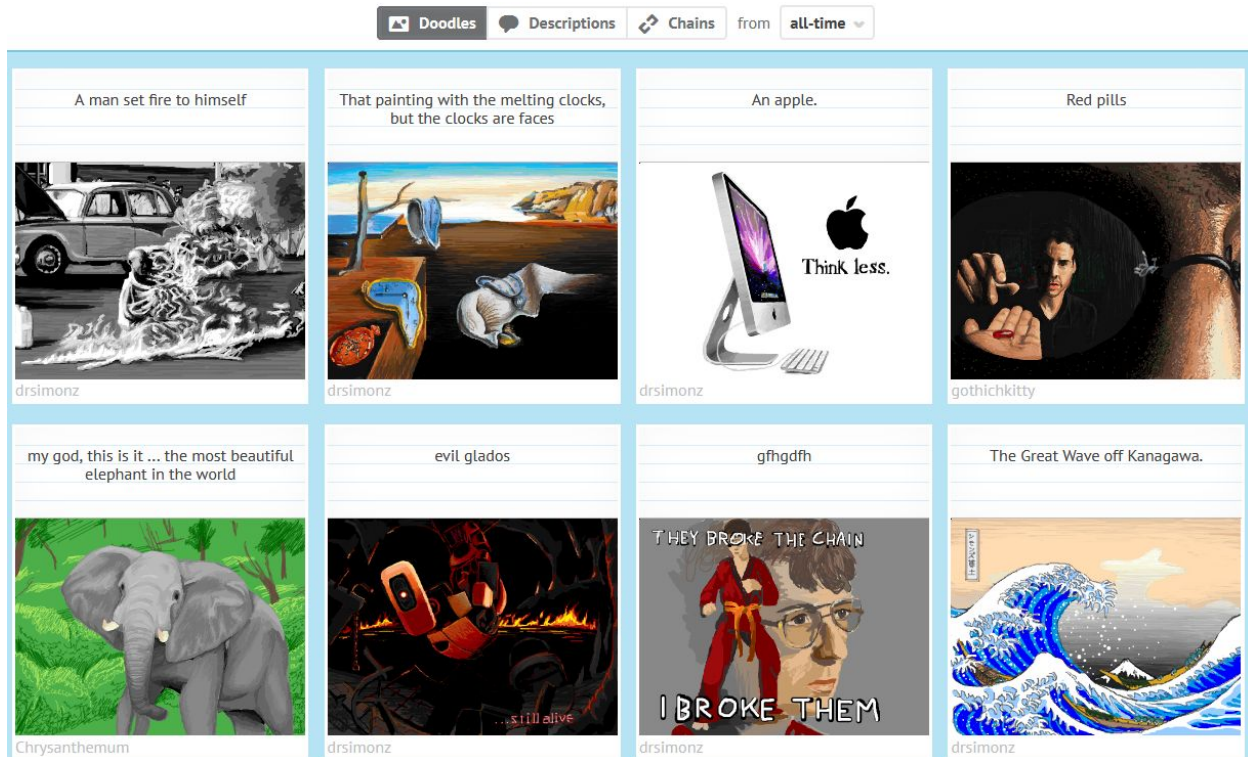
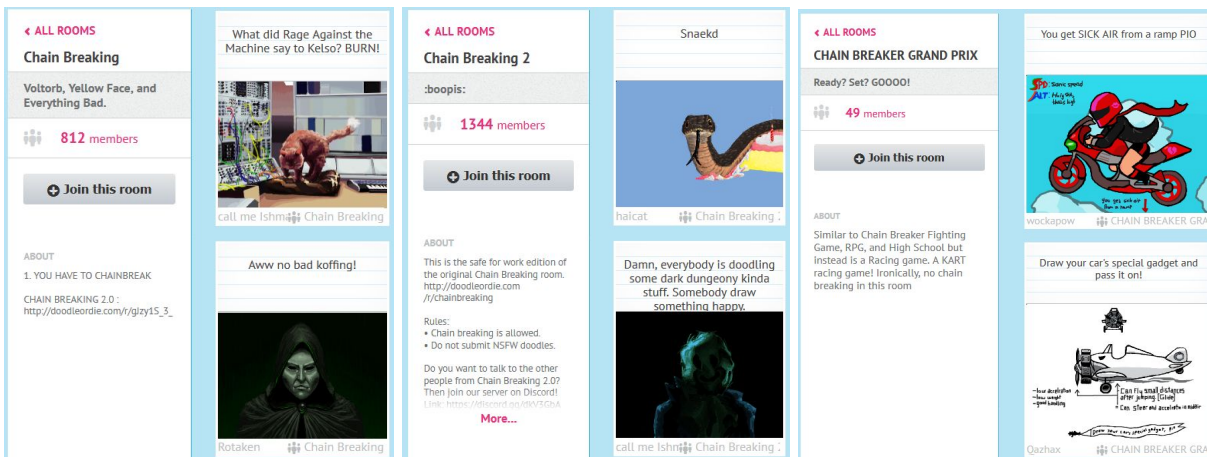


Figure 4b. The same page as in 4a, but with the filter changed to show the game's top doodles of all time. This is a mere preview of some of the artistic talent and sheer effort put into the game while using a minimalist pen tool. The top-liked doodle of all time is a reenactment of Thích Quảng Đức's self immolation drawn by user drsimonz in response to the prompt "A man set fire to himself".

Similar to party games like Telephone, board games like Monopoly, video games like Super Mario Brothers, and so forth, *Doodle or Die* can grow stale for its players. Eventually, and perhaps inevitably, the game fell prey to Suit's notion of triflers and cheats. A trifler is one who recognizes the rules and mechanics of a game but does not strive for the intended goal, either opting for their own or just playing the game for the sake of playing. *Doodle or Die* has no win or loss states, there are merely opportunities to participate in a chain or pass it up. There is a goal, however, and that is to try to continue a chain to the best of your ability. If you are given the prompt "A bird waves hello to an airplane in the sky," you as the player are expected to draw that to the extent of your abilities, perhaps with artistic or comedic liberties.

To disregard this goal and instead draw whatever one feels like is considered breaking the chain; users that do so can be flagged for "chainbreaking." Triflers who enjoyed drawing whatever they liked, or at least preferred to avoid the pressure to completely adhere to a prompt, ended up forming a ["Chain Breaking" room](#) suited specifically to that purpose (fig. 5a). At a later point in time, some particularly contrarian members of the Chain Breaking room began to reverse-chainbreak by following the flow of the prompts and creating cohesive chains against the spirit of the room's altered ruleset. The Chainbreakers grew in size and ended up diverging into other rooms with varying specialized themes and events (fig. 5b, 5c).



Figures 5a, 5b, 5c. The original Chain Breaking room is shown in 5a. Figure 5b shows the “version 2” room which was created to be safe for work and accessible to a wider audience. In 5c we can see a room created for a specific competitive event intended to be played between Chainbreakers members. In its “About” panel, we can see that the room creator is self aware of the irony in disallowing chain breaking for a Chainbreakers event.

Breaking the Game

As established earlier, *Doodle or Die* features a simplistic drawing canvas with one tool and sixteen colors. Users can upgrade their account to “Super” status for \$9/yr, which yields an expanded color palette and other miscellaneous features (fig. 6). Unfortunately for the administrators, or fortunately for the users, the HTML5/Javascript canvas is easy to tinker with using browser scripts and third-party clients. Greasyfork user [Noko0000](#) published a browser script titled [Doodle Or Die More Colors!](#). This script allows anyone to utilize an expanded color palette, and those knowledgeable of hex color codes could modify the script to include the exact colors they desire (fig. 7). *Doodle or Die* user Qazhax created a [desktop client](#) for the website using Java and Scala. It features an entirely new toolset including vector lines, beziers, and gradient fill, as well as a custom colors palette and a layers system (fig. 8).

Beyond the quality of life improvement for users, such as separating your work into layers, the client’s gradient tool allows for drawings that are impractical or even humanly impossible with the default *Doodle or Die* toolset. Doodles from even the most dedicated doodlers like [drsimonz](#) still

feature a painterly appearance due to the pen tool's minimum stroke size; it is not possible to achieve pixel-perfection when the finest tool is a round shape several pixels in radius. Even if one were so inclined to try, default users cannot create completely smooth color transitions like a gradient. Because of the gradients allowed by Qazhax's client, and the ease with which users can create smooth lines and curves, the appearance of some doodles lend more to something created in illustrator than something painstakingly painted with a mere pen tool. These distinct differences make products of Qazhax's client easier, even obvious, to tell apart from regular doodles, while products of *Doodle Or Die More Colors!* appear closer to something a "Super" user could create with their extended color palette (fig. 6-9). It is undecided whether the community views these tools as natural enhancements to the gameplay or dishonest hacks that dispirit *Doodle or Die* as a game.

Like Doodle or Die? Become a Super Doodler!


Support us by buying one year of Super Doodle or Die for just **\$9**

Help Doodle or Die support programs that teach inner city children how to program!
Round up to an even \$10 by throwing in an extra buck for the awesome charity [CodeNow](#) and Doodle or Die will match your dollar!


Upgrade to Super for 1 Year

We use [Stripe](#) for secure credit card processing in over 135 currencies. You may also [pay with PayPal](#).


itsmav, in exchange for your support, we'll give you the following features as our way of saying thanks:




Extended color palette for your doodling pleasure



Replay doodles and see how they were drawn



Unlimited skips



Hide all advertisements

Figure 6. The monetization model of *Doodle or Die*.

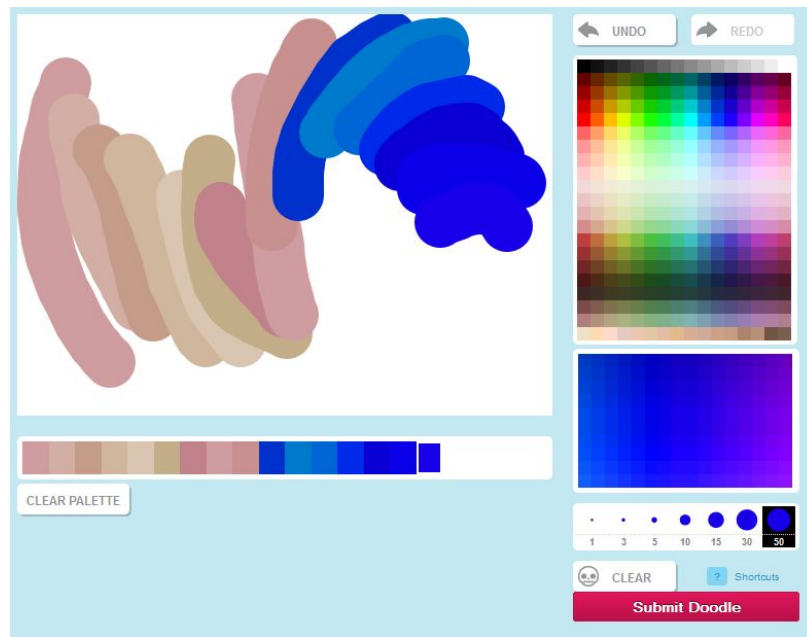


Figure 7. The expanded color palette provided by the *Doodle Or Die More Colors!* script.

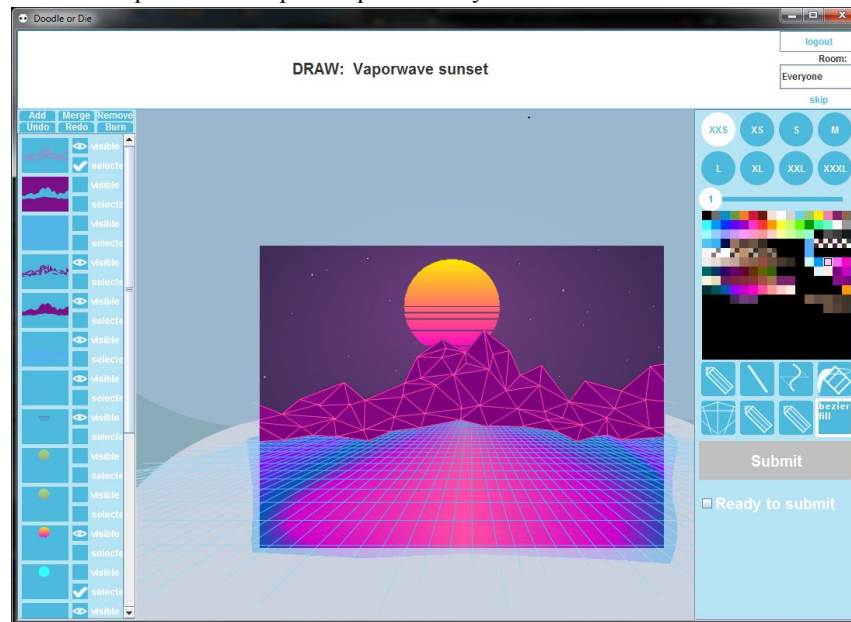
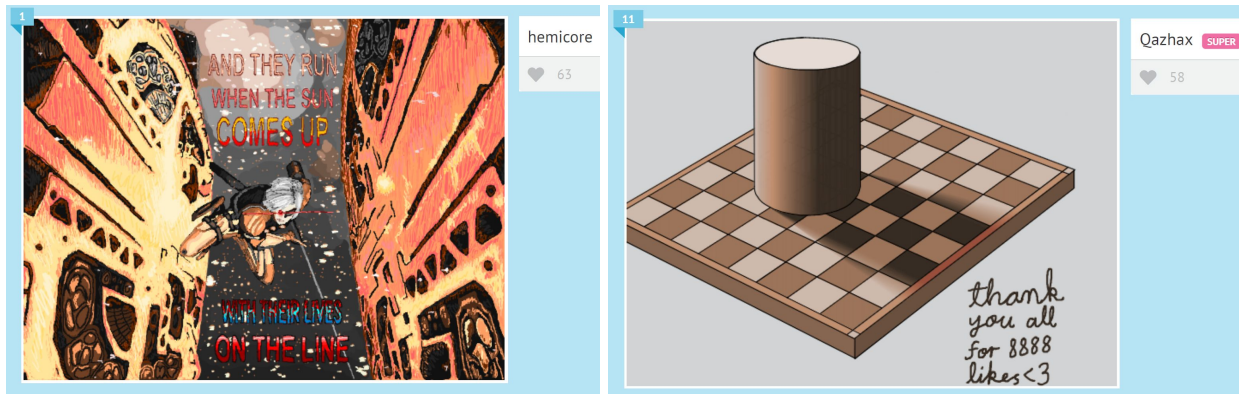


Figure 8. *Doodle or die drawing program* by Qazhax. It is a third-party java-based client that does not utilize a browser at all.



Figures 9a, 9b. A doodle by user hemicore, shown in 9a, makes use of the expanded color palette offered by the *Doodle Or Die More Colors!* script. Qazhax shows off the line, curve, and gradient color features of his custom client to recreate Edward H. Adelson’s *Checker Shadow Illusion* in 9b.

Experimentation

For the sake of illustrating how third-party scripting for *Doodle or Die* affects gameplay and meta, and to determine whether usage of third-party scripting still qualifies as “playing” rather than “cheating”, I have experimented with both regular and third-party-assisted gameplay. I first played the game normally using the website’s standard toolset, then again using Qazhax’s customized client (fig. 10a, 10b). To standardize the comparisons, I limited myself to 3 minutes with each drawing. The regular drawing method definitely felt more labor intensive and my hand-drawn lines are wobbly and inconsistent. With Qazhax’s client, I was able to quickly, easily, and smoothly generate curved lines onto a layer above a pre-colored background. It was ultimately my opinion, based on this experience, that the game is more gratifying to play with a more advanced toolset which better facilitates elaborate images. Arguably, the third-party tools created by the *Doodle or Die* community have contributed to the overall experiential goal and possibly extended the lifespan of the *Doodle or Die* community itself.

Despite the overwhelming usage of these tools, the developers of the website are not interested in incorporating new features to the game. Last seen on the *Doodle or Die* twitter page in October of 2014 (as of now, December 2018), there has been no administrator interaction with the community since. The website’s [About page](#) sports a “Vote for New Features” that leads to a [uservoice.com](#) page

which is no longer operable. The administrators are presumably still somewhat involved as the website itself is still online and functioning despite sometimes experiencing difficulties or infrequently going offline. Though *Doodle or Die* was originally a 24 hour coding challenge, its explosive success led to viability in monetization and continued development. Why, then, do the developers stand by idly? Perhaps it is not seen as worthwhile to incorporate new features that are already freely available from third-party tools, or perhaps third-party tools are already considered a part of the *Doodle or Die* game itself.

Is the game really limited to the website it resides on? As Adam Jackson writes in [*Metagames*](#), “the social game a population is playing is not just an exogenous fact of its circumstances, but also an endogenous product of evolved traits” (65). While *Doodle or Die* resides on a website that is accessed through your browser, it is hardly a game without interaction from the user. This interaction requires the user’s own system and peripherals, such as their operating system, web browser, keyboard, and mouse. There are no official game rules to *Doodle or Die* that dictate which type of browser or which brand of mouse are acceptable for play, so wouldn’t any option be sufficient to play the game? Qazhax’s custom game client technically serves as an alternative web browser that loads the *Doodle or Die* website with some injected modifications; arguably one is still playing the game in the same way a *Dungeons and Dragons* player might play with an extended tileset to accomodate more players. It seems reasonable to assert that both of the doodles I created in my experiment were created while playing *Doodle or Die*, regardless of the inclusion of third-party modifications or scripts.



Figures 10a, 10b. My first attempt at doodling using the default tool is shown in 10a. I had to choose between 8 colors and different stroke weights for the pen. In 10b I was able to fill the entire canvas with light blue, then quickly create some thick curved lines which overlapped at different angles to give a wavy effect. The gray and white clouds were quickly scribbled into the sky using the regular pen tool.

The Narrative

Doodle or Die was first launched in 2011 and developer interaction has decreased in recent years. The website is still functional, but there are intermittent bouts of slowness or inability to load images. The game is far past its glory days following the Node Knockout award, but there is still a small active community of players today. What keeps these players dedicated to the game despite the technical difficulties and lack of attention from the gaming community at large? I joined the Chain Breaking community's Discord server and interviewed a few loyal players about their experiences and why they still play *Doodle or Die* today.

"I've met tons of wonderful people," says user TGIBADTY. "They're supportive and friendly ... I'm very proud of them all and all they've been through, and I will probably keep doodling for as long as I can. I'm so honored to know all these wonderful artists."

A user by the name of DC was also fond of the *Doodle or Die* community, but had a favorite particular doodler. “Urmom69,” says DC fondly about another user. “That’s why I came back to the site, because I wanted to see her artwork again.”

Glad to see that the doodling community was alive and well, I was curious to see whether or not the members ever considered the meta of *Doodle or Die*. Some were unfamiliar with the term, others knew of meta from other, more competitive games but had not given the meta of a social drawing game much thought.

“I do think that there is a meta for achieving viewership, likes and favorites in DoD, but it is more similar to accruing social media viewership,” says user swagdog. “Popular specialty rooms guarantee interested viewership. More effort and skill in creating good responses do guarantee some likes. Humor also is a major factor.”

On the topic of specialty rooms, user Moolin brought up the Chain Breaking room and how its deviation from the normal flow of the game constitutes a meta development.

“In the Everyone room, it’s really disrespectful to just break chains with a scribble. But the whole idea of the Chainbreaker room was to break those chains, and it went further when people decided to not break them within the Chainbreaking room.”

Indeed, it seems the most common form of meta for games is deviating from the way it is “supposed” to be played. Perhaps you like to play Monopoly with house rules to shorten its duration, or Uno to avoid situations that feel unfair. In the case of *Doodle or Die*, many rebel against the game’s design entirely, playing by their own rules or simply using the website as a drawing platform for their own amusement.

Roaring to a Finish

So far in my research of *Doodle or Die*, I have investigated the history of the game leading up to its current state of affairs. This history includes the game's origin, community evolution, and some fans' involvement to develop third-party software to extend the game's functionality. With the help of scholarly publications and personal interviews alike, I have established how *Doodle or Die* is a game with meta and how that meta includes modified play which evolves from community efforts. I look next to *Doodle or Die*'s future and would like to interview some particular community members with plans to create a new, revamped web game of their own inspired by the back-and-forth prompting and doodling experience that so many players have come to love. I myself would love to see what sort of creative community could evolve from a game with more active development and more extensive social features. The time is especially ripe with the significant exodus of creative users from Tumblr.

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