

WEB

INSIDE PATREON, THE ECONOMIC ENGINE OF INTERNET CULTURE

By [Adi Robertson](#) | [@thedextriarchy](#) | Aug 3, 2017, 11:36am EDT

Illustrations by [Garret Beard](#)

In 2013, Peter Hollens was an aspiring a cappella singer surviving, in his words, by living on ramen in someone else's house. Hollens was hardly new to the music business; he'd been a record producer and cruise

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supporters could offer to pay a few dollars every time Hollens released a music video, with Patreon taking a 5 percent cut. Four years later, around 3,600 people are paying Hollens over \$13,000 twice a month for a new video, and Hollens is a devoted evangelist. “I think every single artist and creator, anyone who wants to make a living, should have a Patreon,” he told me at this year’s Vidcon, a video conference where he performed as a featured creator. “You’re talking to the most biased person, because it’s literally been everything for me.”

“YOU’RE TALKING TO THE MOST BIASED PERSON, BECAUSE IT’S LITERALLY BEEN EVERYTHING FOR ME.”

Though not everyone is so effusive about Patreon, both at Vidcon and in the larger creative community, the service inspires praise that would be almost unfathomable for most web platforms. YouTube video creators, who comprise much of Patreon’s upper echelon, treat their platform with open mistrust — especially at Vidcon, at a time when many of them see the site’s [recent “adpocalypse”](#) threatening their profits. Meanwhile, Patreon’s mission statement — “helping creators get paid” — drew cheers at multiple panels.

As its name suggests, Patreon is loosely modeled on the arts patronage system of the Renaissance, which produced masterworks like Michelangelo’s Sistine Chapel. It’s the latest turn in the never-ending cycle of ways people have funded “free” art, from federal grants to corporate sponsorships to, most recently, impression-based advertising. While Kickstarter revolutionized how people raise money for games, gadgets, and other products, Patreon is aiming for something far more ambitious: “We want to fund the creative class,” CEO and co-founder Jack Conte tells me. “Ten years from now, we want kids growing

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gatekeepers or mass-market appeal. And in the process, it's blurred the lines between art, artist, and audience in an unprecedented way.

In 2013, Patreon's future CEO Jack Conte was known as a musician, comprising one-half of the quirky indie duo Pomplamoose. He was conceiving a video for his solo song "Pedals" — an elaborate four-minute production that featured a spaceship-like set straight out of a '70s sci-fi movie, complete with moving mechanical parts and singing robots. [Conte estimated](#) that once it was complete, the video might get a million views on YouTube over the course of the year, which would translate to \$100 in ad revenue. He'd spent three months and \$10,000 on it.

On YouTube, Conte earned a fraction of a cent for every individual who watched "Pedals." But if even a few of those people put a dollar in an online tip jar, Conte figured, that math would change dramatically. And what if people also agreed to support his future videos — and any other artist could do the same thing? Conte mentioned the idea to entrepreneur Sam Yam, an old college roommate and founder of mobile advertising company AdWhirl. Yam loved it, and after two months of development, they launched an early version of Patreon in May 2013.

FROM NICHE CREATORS TO SMALL MEDIA EMPIRES

Conte had expected that people might pledge a dollar or two per video. But within a couple of weeks, he was making around \$4,000 for each one, with the

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in January 2016. Conte is still funding his solo music on Patreon, and so is Pomplamoose, which nets \$5,000 a song from around 1,700 supporters.

The Patreon model isn't that different from monthly museum or public radio donations. At launch, some people also noted parallels with the paid membership club for Pete Abrams' webcomic [*Sluggy Freelance*](#). But Patreon makes it easy for anyone to set up and manage their own version of this system, and unlike a generic online tip jar, it offers a trusted platform with brand-name appeal.

[Initially known](#) as a haven for niche creators, Patreon is increasingly funding small media empires. YouTube star Philip DeFranco, formerly part of Discovery-backed conglomerate Group Nine Media, left in May to establish a Patreon-funded news network. Complexly, a company founded by Hank and John Green of Vlogbrothers fame, runs a half-dozen Patreons that help support educational shows like *Crash Course* (around \$28,300 / month), *SciShow* (\$21,800 / month), and *How to Adult* (a considerably smaller \$101 / month). Patreon even introduced a new, more buttoned-down design in June, emphasizing its role as a platform for businesses, not just digital buskers.

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Many Patreon campaigns offer perks like high-resolution art or early video access, but patrons usually aren't just buying access to art, the way they might back a product on Kickstarter. They're also not making charitable donations to solve a specific problem, like they might on GoFundMe. Instead, Patreon offers individuals the opportunity to provide a more profound

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join Aranda's private *Minecraft* server, where he'll periodically drop in and play with them. Other creators hold live streams or chat sessions; Discord, a group voice and text chat platform popular with gamers, added Patreon integration last year.

FOR \$3 A MONTH, PLAY 'MINECRAFT' WITH YOUR FAVORITE VLOGGER

Because neither of these strategies promise a specific end product, Patreon artists get more flexibility than they would on a platform like Kickstarter. If a specific project fails or changes over time, they're less likely to leave angry backers waiting for rewards. (Because campaigns collect small periodic donations, most supporters also aren't putting down hundreds of dollars at a time.)

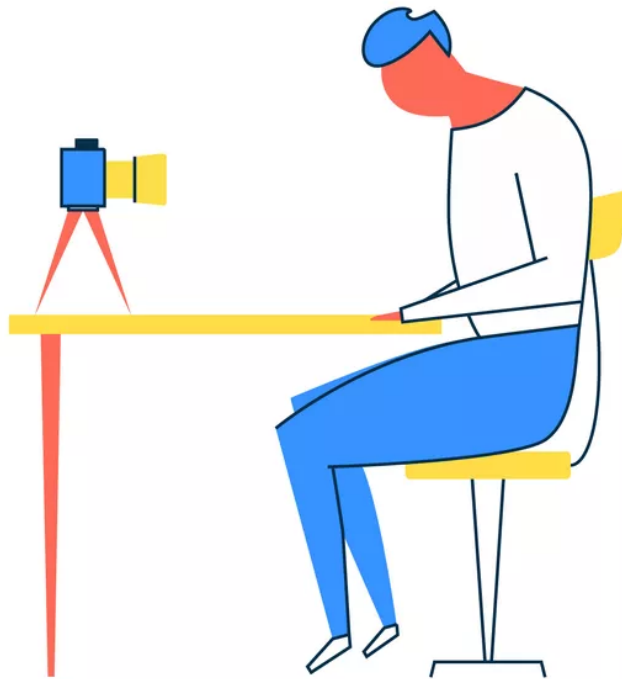
Patreon now funds a huge range of material, much of which predates the platform — initiatives like *McSweeney's Internet Tendency* and the decade-old video game *Dwarf Fortress*. Its permissive stance on adult material has made it [a haven for erotic artists](#), several of whom populate independent statistics site Graphtreon's [top 50 campaigns](#). (Graphtreon itself is funded through a Patreon campaign.) Still, certain types of work seem far better suited to the platform than others — music, the very impetus for the platform, is actually one of the less popular categories. Today the leaderboard is dominated by podcasts and YouTube videos, topped by DeFranco's news network and the political podcast *Chapo Trap House*.

Conte doesn't find the prominence of these genres surprising. He says successful accounts are made up of "'creators who love their fans, and creators

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Held in Anaheim, California, since 2012, Vidcon is mostly a laid-back show, especially compared to the Adrenalin-fueled E3 gaming show I attended just a week earlier in neighboring Los Angeles. But occasionally, the milling groups of attendees coalesce into a crush of frenetic (mostly) teens and tweens — one of whom, buried somewhere in the nucleus, is

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are complex and stylish, but he ends each one by earnestly addressing the camera, breaking the fourth wall between him and his audience.

PATREON SEEMS TAILOR-MADE FOR RADICAL ACCESSIBILITY

In this system, it's almost impossible to separate a work of art from its creator — or, at least, its creator's public persona. Is there a future for someone who wants to be a musician, but not a personality? "No. I don't think so," Hollens says. "I don't think the reclusive thing is going to happen anymore. That's not the world we live in. Like, the Brad Pitts of the world" — distant celebrities who are loved from afar — "are losing value."

This doesn't just mean Hollywood stars. It would also apply to authors and artists whose inaccessibility can be a form of public image. I ask Conte if J.D. Salinger-style recluses could survive in the age of Patreon. "I do think you can do that. And I think it's up to the creator to make it work," he says. But could it happen on Patreon? That seems less likely. Conte's prime example of a modern-day Salinger success story was *The Oatmeal* creator Matthew Inman, who posts comics sporadically and has no comment section on his website. Inman has had fantastic success with crowdfunding: in 2012, he raised over a million dollars for a Nikola Tesla museum. But he's not on Patreon, and he's written about the stress of feeling beholden to an audience, which is a core element of the platform.

Patreon creators can find their close relationships with patrons not just gratifying, but productive. Rebecca Watson, an early Patreon adopter who makes videos under the moniker Skepchick, says that the site has helped her

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“People just like what I’m creating,” he says. “I don’t think they want to see me on YouTube, talking at them.”

“YOU KNOW, YOU PISS OFF THE MEDICIS, YOU GET YOUR HEAD CHOPPED OFF.”

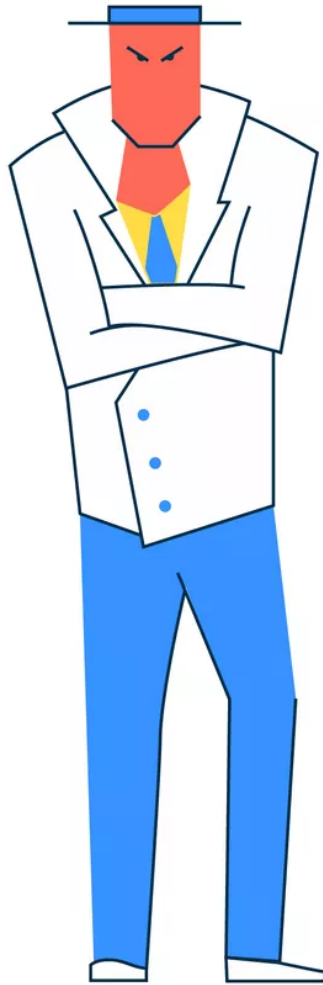
But other people are deeply ambivalent about the whole idea. “Patronage itself has always been an iffy thing. You know, you piss off the Medicis, you get your head chopped off. And now we get that same kind of thing in the virtual world,” says writer and recording artist Mike Errico, [a critic of](#) the platform. Errico thinks Patreon can offer a good financial deal for musicians, but he worries that making artists immediately accountable to a loyal audience could discourage them from taking risks. “You’ve got a boss, but your boss is this cloud of fans.”

Some also worry that Patreon — like crowdfunding in general — inadvertently promotes individual relationships as a substitute for real, structural support. “The rise of Patreon coincides with a time in history when it is pretty much impossible to find economically sustainable creative jobs,” says reporter Emily Gera, who memorably criticized Patreon-funded games journalism on *Polygon* during [the platform’s early days](#). “Patreon has helped many creatives, many of them friends of mine, put food on their table and supplement their day-to-day careers. But I think it’s a band-aid on top of a bigger issue, which is a lack of sensible salaries/funding from both a federal and corporate level.”

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In a world where someone's image is part of their art, some stars preserve a broad, apolitical appeal. Hollens demurs when I ask about health care and economics, for example, and avoids using profanity that doesn't fit with his self-described family-friendly image. But Patreon also rewards the exact opposite: tapping into small but passionate communities with ideas and

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PATREON GRANTS INDEPENDENCE FROM GATEKEEPERS, FOR GOOD AND ILL

For Watson, who covers women's rights, it also provided an alternative to the roller coaster of viral infamy — where a few videos got huge numbers of hits from both sympathetic viewers and angry trolls, only to have YouTube to suspect click fraud and pull advertising. “My fans would say, ‘When are you going to make videos again? I really used to love your videos.’ And I'd have to tell them, ‘Well, I don't do it anymore. It's just it's not worth it for me, financially and psychologically,’” she says. “Now, I put a video on YouTube, I don't care how many views it gets — I don't care if it only gets a thousand views. And I don't care what people say in the comments. I don't even read the comments.”

But there's a darker side to this as well. During Vidcon, feminist critic Anita Sarkeesian decried what she called a crowdfunded “cottage industry of online harassment and anti-feminism,” after a confrontation with reactionary vlogger Carl “Sargon of Akkad” Benjamin — who makes \$5,000 a month through Patreon. The site's openness doesn't just help new groups break into the creative industry, it can also fund echo chambers for people with repugnant views about race, gender, and sexuality, including orbiters of the white nationalist alt-right movement. Personalities who would repel brands or advertisers can operate with comparative ease on Patreon, where donations double as a countercultural statement and a finger in the eye of supposed mainstream political correctness.

Patreon has spent years trying to draw the line between permitting offensive speech and funding hate. The platform offered general guidelines against bad behavior for the first year of its life, but like many websites, it was blindsided by

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position about this kind of thing," [he admitted](#). Eventually 8chan went down, *The Sarkeesian Effect* stayed up, and Patreon added a series of specific prohibitions on "doxing," hate speech, and harassment. Conte avoids talking about Gamergate today. "I really would rather not dive into that stuff," he says. "It was a very painful few months for me. Not only for me as like, the co-founder of Patreon, but just personally. It was a very dark time."

The site is still negotiating the boundaries of its platform, though. It recently banned alt-right media figure Lauren Southern, who [tried to stop](#) a European search-and-rescue boat from looking for refugees, for funding "activities that are likely to cause loss of life." Not long after, it [removed the page](#) of anti-fascist news outlet *It's Going Down* for re-posting an anonymous message about blocking trains carrying fracking equipment. But it's remained attractive to people like Benjamin, whose vituperative "takedowns" of Sarkeesian and other feminists helped fuel Gamergate and the ongoing culture war that's followed. They're an ugly mirror of Patreon's productive, engaged, and personality-driven ideal creator, except that their appeal comes not from making things people love, but from telling them who to hate.

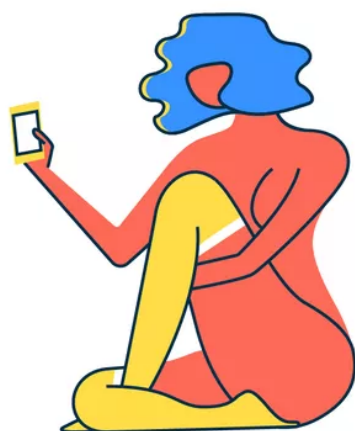
And if Patreon ends up accidentally funding internet harassment, it could undermine its core goal: making creative work viable for everyone. "It's sort of impossible for women and minorities to take Patreon seriously as a platform that welcomes marginalized creators when they are doing nothing to stop people from using their platform to profit from hate speech," says Anna Kreider, who has extensively covered feminism and crowdfunding on her Patreon-funded blog. Kreider started the blog to address sexism in gaming, but she eventually wound it down after what she describes as years of misogynist harassment. It

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the political spectrum — and the lines around them are getting more and more difficult to draw.



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Patreon doesn't spend much time promoting specific campaigns. Its minimal discovery options let visitors browse the top 20 artists in several categories, but finding more requires a keyword search. While Patreon's blog offers tips for building an effective campaign page and promoting it on outside social media, the platform is meant to translate existing enthusiasm into financial support, not generate a fandom from scratch.

"WE WANT TO FUND THE WHOLE CREATIVE CLASS. BUT YOU GOTTA START SOMEWHERE."

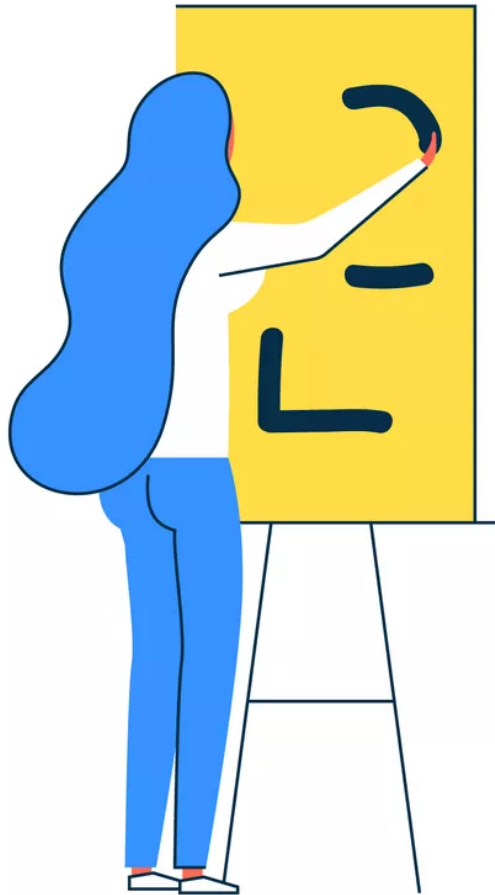
For a company that's still in its early days, expanding too quickly can be a huge mistake. But this means that, to some extent, Patreon is going to reflect the status quo of entertainment — complete with its racial and gender inequalities. When Conte invited Kanye West to Patreon last year in response to West's tweets about supporting black musicians, [writer and Patreon user Creatrix Tiara posted a blistering rebuttal](#), arguing that Conte had missed the point. Superstars like Kanye no longer needed Patreon, she said, but up-and-coming black artists did — and Patreon wasn't doing enough to help them. Patreon doesn't offer a demographic breakdown of its users, but when Tiara searched for hip-hop campaigns on the platform, the most highly funded artists were all white.

Speaking today, Tiara says she doesn't feel like much has changed. It's not necessarily Patreon's job to act as a publicist, she says, but if it wants to make its utopian vision a reality, it might have to become something more than a payment platform. "If they're going to market themselves as 'we can make you successful,' then maybe they *should* be more proactive," she says. That could include offering patronage grants to small but promising campaigns, or devoting

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Patreon is still too new and too small to judge its total impact, its long-term prospects, or who it might end up appealing to. Because donations are recurring, it's somewhat easier to project earnings for Patreon than for one-off crowdfunding sites, which has made it a safer bet for some investors. Because patrons support the same people over and over, though, it

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Some people have staggeringly large Patreons, like multimedia artist Amanda Palmer, who gets \$40,000 (as her page puts it) “per thing.” But because there’s no concrete end point, there may never be universally recognized “blockbuster Patreons” the way there are blockbuster Kickstarters — massive mainstream campaigns that will be remembered for years to come, either as great successes or slow-motion train wrecks.

If anything, Patreon reflects and amplifies the web’s atomized community structure. In the darkest cases, it’s an echo chamber where hate gets louder, in the brightest, it’s a fertile ground for people who are crowded out of the mainstream. And the more powerful its model gets, the less power the term “mainstream” may even have. “We have this dichotomy in our heads of the starving artist and the rich and famous, sex-drugs-rock-and-roll, world-touring musician. And that myth is — I don’t even want to say dying. It’s dead. That myth is no longer true,” says Conte. “But the rest of the world doesn’t know that yet.” ■


TECH

Sonos may finally be releasing a new Playbar

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