October 25, 2017 - At this time when you can access almost every piece of information in the world, what is the best possible thing to do? Charles Broskoski co-created Are.na, an online tool and community attempting to answer this question. Before focusing on Are.na full-time, Broskoski was a software engineer at Artsy and previously studied fine art at Parsons School of Design.

As told to Laurel Schwulst, 3394 words.

Tags: Art, Technology, Collaboration, Education.

# Charles Broskoski on self-discovery that happens upon revisiting things you've accumulated over time

**How do you normally describe to someone completely new to Are.na … what Are.na is?**

I usually say something along the lines of, "It's a platform for doing research online." The person will usually ask, "What do you mean by research?" and I will reply, "Like the kind of research you are doing when you find yourself going down a Wikipedia hole. It's a way to put images, text, links, and files into a visual space where you can make sense of what you are looking at on the internet."

**Yeah, it seems like communicating Are.na is an evolving game, as seen in "How do you describe Are.na at a party?". Do you have any favorite submissions to that channel?**

There are so many good descriptions in that channel. Karly's "Research as leisure activity" is good. I also like Toby's "it's like having an API for your mind." But I think my favorite is Damon's "a toolkit for assembling new worlds from the scraps of the old," as it's both beautiful and also something that would be hilariously awkward to say to someone at a party.



https://www.are.na/charles-broskoski/arena-influences
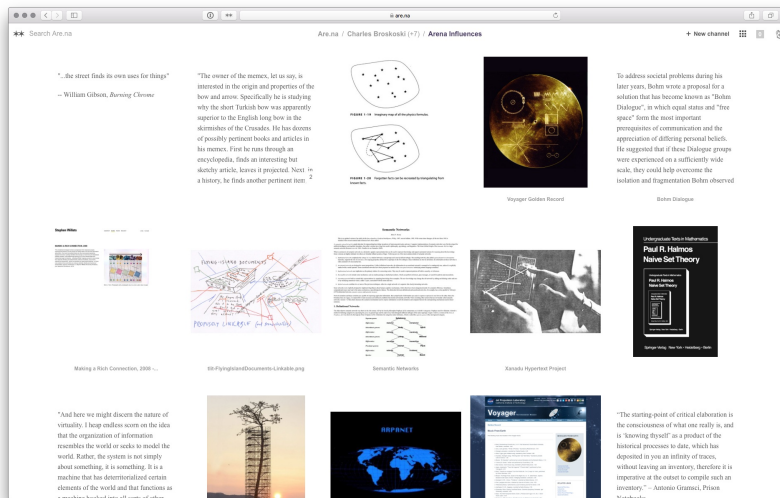
**How did Are.na come to be?**

Around 2006, I met John Michael Boling through a social bookmarking website called Del.icio.us. Your Del.icio.us profile ended up being a nice representation of what you were interested in and actively thinking about.

Del.icio.us let you see the constellation of people with similar interests. For example, maybe you see that 20 other people saved the same link you did. Then you can look through these peoples' saved links and learn about things you had never considered before. I met John Michael simply through us saving many of the same links and finding there was a lot of overlap.

**Were you a student around then?**

Yeah. Cory Arcangel, who was my professor at the time, introduced me to Del.icio.us. He made everyone in class use it. The first part of class was everyone talking through some links they found on the internet. People would bring in things that may not seem interesting at first, but Cory was amazing at parsing out why something might be interesting. It showed you it's important to think deeply about why you like what you like.

"You're in college and should be interested in everything" was Cory's whole point with the link sharing. You have to open your brain to many different things and investigate them. It's the primary time when you can develop those ideas and habits for the rest of your life.

**So what happened to Del.icio.us?**

Yahoo, who owned Del.icio.us, accidentally leaked a slide about their plans to "sunset" Del.icio.us late in 2010. Immediately almost everyone using it was done and left.

At that time, John Michael was working at Rhizome, and I was trying to be an artist. We started talking about what a platform would be like that could replace Del.icio.us, or replace our community that we had found on Del.icio.us.

Del.icio.us made us realize the importance of archiving casual web (and other) research. That process has a lot of positive effects that are hard to explain until you've built a habit out of it. For one, there's a self-discovery that happens when you revisit things you've accumulated over a period of time. You look back and begin to recognize patterns in your own thinking.



https://www.are.na/block/2638

"I believe that we, that this planet, hasn't seen its Golden Age. Everybody says its
finished ... art's finished, rock and roll is dead, God is dead. Fuck that! This is my
chance in the world. I didn't live back there in Mesopotamia, I wasn't there in the
Garden of Eden, I wasn't there with Emperor Han, I'm right here right now and I
want now to be the Golden Age ...if only each generation would realise that the time
for greatness is right now when they're alive ... the time to flower is now." -Patti
Smith

https://www.are.na/block/3088

Around that time after graduating, I was trying to be an artist. Right after my first solo show, I thought
to myself, "I never want to do this again." I liked making art, but I didn't like the career part.

When I came back from my show, John Michael, who was also my roommate, had met a friend through his
family. This friend was J. Stuart Moore. He had founded a company called Sapient, which when it started,
was like an upstart rival to IBM in the 90s. Stuart's big thing was solving problems within these
organizations. Sapient had a set of tools and processes they would go through to get to the root of a
problem and work from there. Stuart's idea was that if you could containerize knowledge, like break
knowledge down into chunks, then you could reuse those chunks to solve problems in different ways.

John Michael and Stuart started talking. John Michael saw some overlaps between what we were thinking
about with Are.na and what Stuart was thinking about with his informational building blocks.

Eventually, I began coding some rough prototypes for John Michael and Stuart. At that point, we didn't
talk about how it would be a business or even how it would function on a practical, user, or human level.
It was really, really utopian.

Those days we asked questions like, "How does a person be their best self on the internet?" and "How do
you get on the internet and solve your own problems to find the life you want to live?"

Then we brought Dena [Yago] and Damon [Zucconi] on, and we started working together. Stuart lived in
Manchester, MA, and we all would go to his house for weeks at a time.

We had one lunch where we were by ourselves, without Stuart. We were talking and wondered, "Could we use
any of this stuff? Are we personally interested in this as a platform?" And at the time, the consensus
was, "No." That realization marked a shift. We started thinking about others who tried similar things,
such as Ted Nelson's Xanadu. We started using Are.na to research these references, which was cool.

Around then, Chris [Sherron] and Dan [Brewster] joined. Together we readjusted Are.na so that we would
like using it. We decided Are.na should be a generic system anyone can plug any kind of information into.
We also realized Are.na had to work even if there's no one else around, or without the social component.
Throughout our process, we would periodically return to the question, "Would we use this?"

**That question seems like it was an important guide.**

Definitely. We would go back and forth. We would make it something we would use, and then things would get
off again, from our perspective. We reached a head at a certain point. Our disagreements with Stuart were
about what type of person should be on the platform, what they should be doing, and what's allowed. We
wanted anything to be allowed and there not to be a hierarchy, or telling someone what's important or not.
Stuart was very much the opposite, and he wanted to control the quality. We wanted to do that, but in a
more cultural way, by getting our friends excited and using Are.na. If people we thought were interesting
and smart put their brains on it, we thought the quality would emerge in an organic way.

When we reached this point, we were worried Stuart was just going to fire all of us. But he said, "You
guys can take it and run with it," which was really amazing. We lost him as a collaborator but took
control of the company.

**Wow.**

We still talk to him and he's been very helpful. But at that point, a lot of us were totally burned out. We didn't really do anything with it for a year. We just kept paying the server bills, but we didn't work on it for a while. Then, I think it was 2014, I thought, "If no one else is going to do anything, then I'm just going to…"

**Can you speak more to that decision? I remember you already made the decision before that you definitely didn't want an art career, right?**

Before when I was working on my solo show, I was thinking about what it means to be generous as an artist. At the time, I thought it was about being really personal or really open. Like to the point of being diaristic, or sharing images of me and my family.

Towards the end of making that show, I decided, "No, it's actually about tools. It's actually removing myself entirely and making things for other people to do stuff." I decided making tools is the nicest thing you can do as an artist. So Are.na still feels like a natural extension of where I was going as an artist.

Are.na has changed the way I think. I continue to think about things the same way I would as if I were making art, but I just don't make art. The thoughts come, and I try and articulate them as best as I can (using Are.na most of the time). I put things together and "build a world of thought" that way.
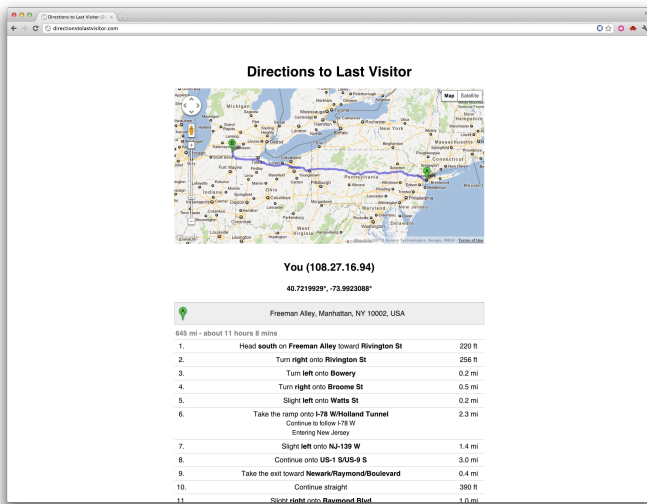


*Directions to Last Visitor*, **2011**

The last piece of art I made, *Directions to Last Visitor*, was a website that would give you Google Maps directions to the last person who visited the piece. It's not online anymore because the domain name expired, but the idea was about connecting two people. Like Are.na, it was a type of conduit.

**I liked how your team kept on returning to this question, "Would we actually use this?" as a guiding principle. It also seems like a technique of zooming out to understand what's actually important. Do you have other "zooming-out" techniques you use today?**

When we started, we had the privilege of getting all of our smart friends using the platform. Now we're interested in what it takes to get the average Instagram user, for instance, to be interested in using Are.na. It's a very cheesy phrase, but we sometimes ask, "How can we make being smart cool?". That is, how can we make casual research—seeking out new knowledge just for the sake of it—a part of an everyday process for a normal internet user?

It's a really tricky problem, because it's as much a cultural issue as it is a product or technology issue. Attention is a finite resource, and how we choose to spend our attention online is, in some ways, a direct reflection of where human culture has gone in an era where access to information is basically unlimited. We are very much in our teenage years—that is, we suddenly have all these new capabilities and it's really easy to just run wild. But there seems to be a shift taking place in mainstream conversation about what effect the average behavior that most social media platforms promote has on human society at large.

The biggest compliment for us is when someone describes Are.na as healthy. We want to cultivate a culture about being curious and going deeper when necessary. We think the feeling of, "I'm interested in this

weird topic and I'm going to see how far that interest goes" is way better than, for instance, putting up a picture and getting 50 likes or something.

**It's like showing the world which way you're going. Doing that can be really hard when you're only focused on an output.**

Yes, it's between "showing the world" and "showing yourself" to the world.

I feel like I have to constantly remind myself of the things I'm actually interested in. Sometimes I wonder if there's a problem with being too curious. That is, when you feel like you're interested in everything. While we do want to cultivate a curiosity, we also think about encouraging more sustained, deep thinking.

It reminds me of "T-shaped" knowledge. Artsy, a start-up I worked at for a while, was particularly interested in hiring engineers who demonstrated this. Like the shape of a "T" suggests, someone with T-shaped knowledge knows many things on a surface level, but then one or very few things very deeply.

**What was your involvement with Artsy like?**

After the first leg of Are.na ended, Damon started working at Artsy as a software engineer. I would ask him advice in updating Are.na's technical architecture. I was developing mostly alone on Are.na then. I thought, "Well, if I can't figure this out very quickly, and do Are.na as a full-time thing, then I can get a job at Artsy if I learn its stack," which is what happened.

Artsy's militant philosophy on open source was very influential for Are.na. Many people at Artsy believe that if it's useful to one person, it's worth making open source. Before that, everything on Are.na was closed. When we shifted to the open source model, the immediate feeling was about everyone judging the bad code you're writing. But the reality is that no one will do that, and no one cares.

The mobile app we're working on now is all open source. People can look through and see exactly what we're working on at any given moment. I doubt anyone does, but it's a possibility.

**After you committed to working on Are.na again, how did Are.na's "second life" go from there?**

I reached out to Daniel [Pianetti], who I met through Are.na, and also all the other people who had worked on Are.na before: Dena, Damon, John Michael, and Chris. I said something like, "I'm going to keep going, do you want to join me?"



https://www.are.na/bryce-wilner/spiral
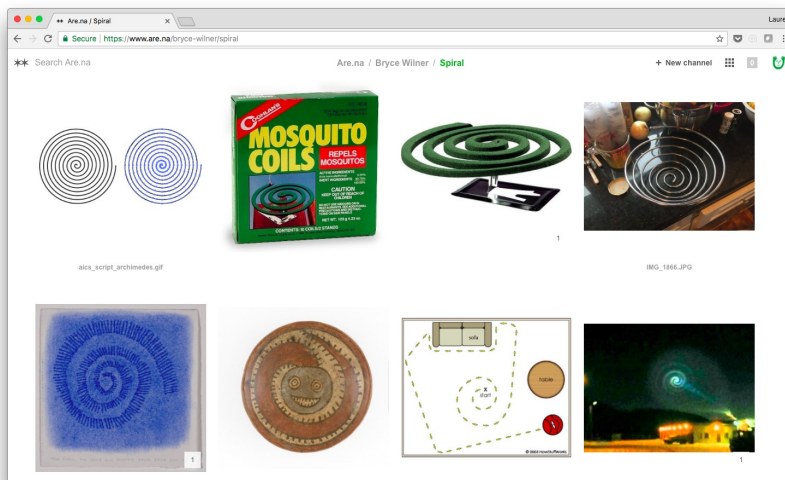
We started thinking about making Are.na sustainable. We thought people who used Are.na should know that there was a business behind it, and that there was a way Are.na could sustain itself and function in the world in a way that made sense, pragmatically and morally.

Right now, we make money by selling premium accounts. But there is the reality of needing to be able to fund our existence until that model reaches a certain point. So in early 2017 we started talking to people about what getting a capital investment would look like. Chris Barley and I had talked maybe four or five times before, because Consortia, his research, strategy, and design company, was using Are.na for their own work. We talked very generally about the state of the internet. I told him we were going to begin

looking for investment and that we had never done it before and we didn't know what we were doing. Shortly after he said, "I'm thinking about investing in Are.na."

Recently we've also been focusing on the Are.na Blog, edited by Meg Miller. Most of the posts are nothing directly about Are.na the product—we hope it's outward-facing in that way.

**Would you describe Are.na as a start-up?**

Yeah, I think that's the easiest shorthand. When we started looking for funding, we were also looking at grants and institutional models. However, we realized there's a time cost to applying to those things, and the money is much less.

With the way some venture capitalists market themselves now, we started feeling like there's common ground we could have with certain firms, where it's more about long-term goals and less about shorter-term, explosive growth.

One of these common grounds is the current state of social media. Any normal person, at some point, will complain about what social media addiction has done to them.

My take is that it boils down to bad business models. If it's going to be explosive growth first, and then you've got to tack on something to make money afterwards, it's always going to be advertising. That's always going to be terrible because it means that in order to keep going, you have to keep people coming back as many times as possible. In other words, you're motivated to make people addicted. And yes, venture capitalists are partially responsible for this. But now, it's clear that people are getting sick of this situation. Most people you talk to are simply done with it, and smart venture capitalists can see this shift as well.

So in terms of having the start-up as a model or using that term as a way to frame ourselves—yes, it's the easiest way to explain to someone on first meeting what we are doing. But we are also trying to build community and culture, and we are motivated to make that as big as we possibly can because we want to give a real alternative to an everyday person as to what one can do on the social internet.

Maybe "providing an alternative," isn't the best way to phrase it. We're not only interested in what that thing could look like—but what the primary activity could be.



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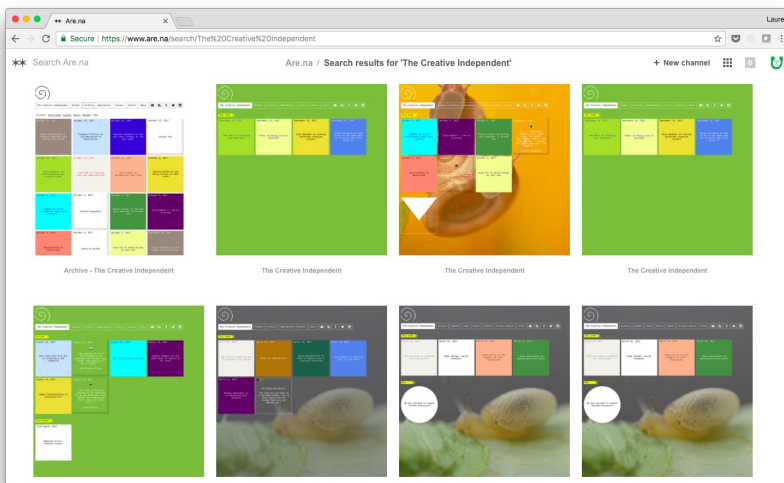
**Do you view Are.na as a lifelong project?**

Yes, I think so. Personally, I'm pretty set on promoting life-long education as the most important thing. Getting people to be curious, in this time when you can access almost every piece of information in the world, is the best possible thing to do to try to help all humans.

It's crazy how things feel in the absolute opposite direction right now in regards to the internet and social media. I feel it myself. It's hard to get yourself into that zone where you're deeply investigative. But it's important. And when you do it, you know it's good.

**Is there anything in particular you do to transport yourself into that zone?**

I recently learned Einstein used to do something specific. To get his brain in the zone, he would bring together two very different things to see what the connection was between them. Are.na at its best is really good for that. So if I haven't used Are.na in a more concentrated way in a while, I'll just make a channel. Sometimes it doesn't work out, but I'll make a channel that's very fuzzy. I'll start to put stuff in it and just see where it goes.

A (sampling of a) few of Cab's favorite things:

Damon Zucconi, both the CTO of Are.na and one of my favorite artists since I first came across his work in 2006. A few samples: http://damonzucconi.com/artworks/boring-average-interesting http://work.damonzucconi.com/edge-transfer/#/rhea-and-dione http://damonzucconi.com/artworks/10-seconds-to-each-point http://damonzucconi.com/artworks/one-thing-comes-after-the-other https://thecreativeindependent.com/weekends/year-by-damon-zucconi

*The Once and Future King* by T.H. White. I found this sitting out in a stack free books a few blocks away from my house. When I started reading it, it felt like the perfect book for me at the time. It's an adaptation of the King Arthur legends, written from 1938–1941, and has all these anachronistic references to World War II (in one part Merlin mentions "the American administration"). On a related note, I also love my neighborhood, Clinton Hill in Brooklyn.

This channel on Are.na: https://www.are.na/alex-singh/a-catalogue-of-simple-pleasures

*Exploits of the Incomparable Mulla Nasrudin* by Idries Shah. A collection of jokes and very short stories featuring Nasrudin, the wise-fool of Middle Eastern folklore (he has some similarities to Merlin). Idries Shah was trying to push Sufi philosophy in the 50s and 60s and was into the idea of teaching stories, that is, a narrative form that could serve as a vehicle for more complex types of psychological knowledge. Nasrudin stories fall into that category, you can read the stories over and over and always find a new take on them.

M.E.S.H, Exasthrus (Pane). My ol' friend James Whipple's track on the Pan Records compilation Mono No Aware. Also the song with James K and Eve Essex "Stretch Deep" is extremely good. Actually, the whole album is good.

Pat Brennen, Celebrity Tropical Fish, 1991. I skateboarded for maybe 15 years. This part came out before I started skating, but I probably watch it more than any other skateboard part. Something about the combination of depressing classical music, kinda sketchy style but still progressive skateboarding, and the amateur filming and editing. It's really such a perfect skate video part. The 2010s version of this is Ryan Sublette's part in Depression Session.

This line from the Ta-Nehisi Coates book, Between the World and Me: "I was made for the library, not the classroom. The classroom was a jail of other people's interests. The library was open, unending, free."

Name
Charles Broskoski

Vocation
Co-founder of Are.na

Fact
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