FCJ-109 Play, Create, Share? Console Gaming, Player Production and Agency

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> *Playing is only the half of it … With LittleBigPlanet you get a fantastic adventure AND the tools which we used to make it [–]. [Y]ou can build anything you've seen in the Story mode, or simply draw inspiration from it, and then create something even more complicated and grandiose! You can be a visionary. (www.littlebigplanet.com)*

When the console game *LittleBigPlanet* (in the following abbreviated as *LBP*) was launched in late 2008, the marketing materials highlighted how the players could now fulfill their creative ambitions and carry out projects traditionally reserved for professional game developers. The marketing rhetoric of *LBP* epitomizes the recent innovation paradigms that emphasize the new roles reserved for users. In the past few years the central role of creative consumers has been noticed in various fields. As the user-centred production processes are finding their way to the core of contemporary economies, value is increasingly created between the companies and their customers. Digital games have been frequently used to illustrate the new organisational frameworks that are based on persuading users to carry out tasks and assignments not traditionally associated with them. However coined, 'user-innovation' (von Hippel, 2005), 'crowdsourcing' (Howe, 2008) or 'pro-am revolution' (Leadbeater and Miller, 2004), contemporary examples of this phenomena always include digital games.

A closer look at the recent open innovation manifestos reveals that the oft-cited examples come almost entirely from PC games while console games remain mostly non-existent in these texts. It is clear that PC and console games differ both in use and in the cultures they create (Taylor, 2007). Equally, the technological and economic backgrounds of the market sectors have their differences (Kerr, 2006). The underlying cause of this distinction is suggested by Jonathan Zittrain, who argues that the generativity of technologies and associated co-creative practices have recently been threatened by increasingly closed and 'tethered' appliances. According to Zittrain (2008: 8), the more centrally controlled devices, like game consoles, persuade 'mainstream users away from a *generative* Internet that fosters innovation and disruption, to an *appliancized* network that incorporates some of the most powerful features of today's Internet while greatly limiting its innovative capacity'.

The concept of *LBP*, a console game inherently dependent on player production, challenges the neat binary of Zittrain's much cited argument about tethered appliances. The first set of research questions rises from this observation. What are the technical and economic constraints and affordances the console as a platform uses to position the productive activities of players? How do these differ from the forms of player production typical of PC gaming (see Sotamaa, 2007a; and Sotamaa, 2007b)? What kind of insights and new perspectives the case of *LBP* offers to questions Zittrain discusses?

Secondly, I outline the characteristics of player agency available for *LBP* players. If the game from the start invites players to co-design the game itself, then how much room there is for resistance and transformation? What would 'illegimate player activities' mean in this context? These questions are tightly connected to the theorisations of creation and distribution of user-created content. Banks and Deuze (2009: 422) conclude the recent discussions in a nutshell:

> [M]uch work can be characterized by debates and discussions between those scholars emphasizing consumer empowerment and recognition of fandom, and those who tend to be more sceptical of the unequal power relationships that remain between a handful of media corporations and the multitude of consumers.

Furthermore, as Terranova (2000) importantly points out, it is crucial to bear in mind that the very existence of free labour rests on the dynamics of informational capitalism. The forms of this affective labour are not produced simply to the needs of the capital but they are voluntarily given. On the whole, the relations between production and consumption need to be evaluated case by case as the relations can at the same time include disruptive, exploitative and mutually beneficial elements. The case of *LBP* allows us to take a closer look at the negotiations between platform holders, developers and players that practically define the limits between supported and unwanted player activities.

The article begins with a short introduction to the game. The next sections analyse the contexts in which console games are traditionally played and describe some of the recent trends that have made game consoles more responsive to player production. The article then moves on to examine more closely the creative projects coming from the players. The conclusion evaluates the central findings in light of contemporary theories of co-creative production.

The Game of Many Levels

15 *LBP* is a puzzle platformer developed by the UK studio Media Molecule and launched in late October (North America) / early November (other areas) 2008. Critics acclaimed the PlayStation 3 (PS3) exclusive and, during its first year in the market, *LBP* received several recognised awards. While the sales figures have failed to reach the boldest forecasts, the one million unit mark was reached in five weeks, and a year and a half after the launch, a respectable 3 million copies have been sold globally [1]. A significant number of patches, expansions and downloadable content packs have been released after the launch, making *LBP* one of the most updated games in the history of the PS3 console. As the continuous flow of new content indicates, the game has been carefully nurtured by the platform holder Sony. However, *LBP* not only showcases how PS3 supports developer-driven software updates, but perhaps even more importantly, it also highlights the capabilities of the PlayStation Network in delivering and filtering player created content. The catchphrase of *LBP*, 'play, create, share', further accentuates how the appeal of the game is significantly based on the content created by the players. In the following section, I make use the slogan to further introduce the game and to connect it to the recent theoretical discussions around player production.

16 PLAY. In *LBP*, the player controls a small creature known as Sackboy / Sackgirl. The character can run, jump, hang onto objects and drag or push them. The game provides a particular aesthetic, borrowing the central mechanics from traditional platformers, but introducing a hand-made visual style seldom seen in digital games before. The merits of the game are, however, not limited to the aesthetic originality but the concept also promotes creativity and sociability in a compelling way.

17 CREATE. Although *LBP* features a set of pre-built levels for players to explore, of equal importance are the parts of the software that allow players to customise the existing levels and to create new levels of their liking. Players can personalise the appearance of their Sackboys / Sackgirls and alter the décor of the pod that operates as the main interface. Stickers collected from the levels can be plastered both onto the walls of the pod and on any surface in the levels and screenshots taken from the levels can be used to create custom stickers. Furthermore, the game includes an advanced level editor that enables players to participate in the design of the game.

18 As Sue Morris (2004) argues 'neither developers nor players can be solely responsible for production of the final assemblage regarded as the game, it requires the input of both'. Media Molecule has made this visible by allowing players to familiarise themselves with the very same creation mechanic used by the studio's professional designers. In the editor mode, the players can create new objects from scratch by starting with basic shapes and filling them with a material of their liking. These objects can be further combined with each other. A variety of strings, bolts, triggers and jets are available for connecting objects to the level and to each other. Custom objects can be saved to a library for later use and shared with the players of the level. Undoubtedly, creating a level takes more time and creativity than playing a level. The editor, however, preserves the visual style and feel of the game and also most of the accessibility experienced in gameplay. While accessible and relatively easy to use, the editor allows player-designers to create unique and complex objects by combining existing components and materials.

19 SHARE. While providing the players with the production tools can surely stimulate creative motivations, the easy access to the distribution may be even more important driver for user contributions in the current networked media environment (van Dijck, 2009: 43-44). In the case of *LBP*, the player has no need to leave the console as both creating levels and sharing them with other members of the community is carried out entirely in game. The players can also rate and tag levels created by other players. To evaluate a level, the player can choose appropriate adjectives from a list of predefined words. Players can also mark their favourite levels, stickers and decorations with "hearts". Other players can then check the hearted items and get more information on them and their creator. The recommendation features are mostly familiar from the

social networking services and other websites. However, *LBP* is the first time that this feature has had such integral importance in the context of a console game.

20 Design-wise, it is quite an achievement to implement a drag and drop editor that is entirely manipulated with the console controller and at the same time able to produce complex and compelling levels. The particular beauty of the *LBP* approach on creation, however, lies in the way the game integrates play and player production together. It is far from the first time a digital game is bundled with an editor. Few designers have, however, mastered the integration of the editor with the gameplay experience. In *LBP*, the original levels include so-called prize bubbles that players collect in order to increase their score. The "pubbles" can also contain items such as new stickers, decorations, materials and objects. In the *Create* mode, these objects can be used for the players' own levels. In addition to this, the original levels also operate as a sort of tutorial for the editor. Playing through the levels helps players understand the relations between different objects and the ways of combining them. The design of different monsters and vehicles is relatively intuitive as one is already familiar with similar artefacts from playing the game. Related to this, the preface of the official Bradygames strategy guide states the following: 'the guide you are about to read will show you all sorts of tricks to help you Play, Create and Share. I'd like you to treat the Create aspect in a similar way as the Play aspect. It should be fun and experimental' (Smith, 2008). The book itself includes first a detailed walkthrough and then after it a guide to using the editor. The order further suggests that once the players approach the editor they are expected to be familiar with the affordances of the various objects.

21 Now if we briefly go back to the appeal of consoles it is clear that many people prefer to sit on a couch while playing games. While this is possible with a PC, consoles are particularly well suited for laid-back (or less laid-back) living room gaming with friends. In this respect, significant work has been done to make the *LBP* editor suit the console gaming situation. The editor not only preserves the visual style of the game but also borrows some other features of the game to sustain the playful mood. First of all, the player navigates the editor with her personalised sack character. Similar to the game, the tutorials need to be "played through" in full before a new set of objects is unlocked. Secondly, in addition to his narration for the tutorial of the game, British comedian Stephen Fry provides a witty voice-over for the interactive tutorials that accompany the create mode. Furthermore, the distribution scheme for player-made levels is somewhat unorthodox: instead of a conventional list or index the menu is represented as a planet and the levels are situated on its surface. Finally, after the major update in November 2009, the multiplayer action, originally reserved only for the Play mode, is also supported in the Create mode as the game now allows up to four players to use the editor together across the Internet.

22 To get an initial understanding of the roles traditionally reserved for console game players, the following section moves on to discuss the technical and economic contexts of console games.

Particularities of Console Gaming

24 Console games form the most significant segment of the games industry in terms of market share. The console market is often described as oligopoly, with the three major players responsible for platform manufacturing and also involved in software production. The competing console platforms – Microsoft Xbox360, Sony PS3 and Nintendo Wii – are proprietary, closed and non-compatible by nature (Kerr, 2006). Dissimilar to PC games that have traditionally been designed to be modifiable for corrections, the consoles have in a historical perspective rarely allowed any modifications to the code sealed in the game cartridge or disc. Due to the concentrated market structure and the particular technological composition content production has throughout the history of consoles been reserved to a limited number of developers.

25 Since Nintendo in the mid 1980´s launched Nintendo Entertainment System, including the 10NES lockout chip, every mainstream console system has contained a mechanism for protecting production rights (O'Donnell, 2009). This decision has allowed the platform holders to carefully guard the content itself and the number of parties capable of providing this content. Every third-party developer needs to obtain a license from the platform holder. The developers are also obliged to turn a share of their profits over to the platform holder. As a consequence, the console environment has provided very little room for players to reprogram or repurpose the machines and until recently, easy updates or modifiable content have had a marginal role in the lives of console gamers.

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Over the years, various solutions, ranging from production control (production lockout mechanisms, license fees, high-priced production tools, mothballing of projects) to access control (regional lockout, digital rights management, user license agreements) have been effectively used to restrict the agency reserved for people willing to repurpose the videogame consoles and to redesign their personal experiences. Due to the platform holders' reserved attitude on player production, the term "console mod" has until recently mostly referred either to the imaginative case customisations built by hobbyists or to the mod chips that are installed to disable the built-in limitations of the game consoles. Symptomatically, mod chip users are routinely banned from using the official online services like Xbox Live. This highlights how the technical restrictions have for long been complemented with legal threats. Players are not only tied by strict end user license agreements (EULAs) that determine the permitted uses of the software but hobbyist projects have routinely received suspension requests and cease and desist letters from the platform holders and other copyright owners. Other projects with minimal economic significance ranging from imaginative Wii Remote hacks to simple flash-based games for the console internet browsers have been mostly tolerated – but not encouraged – by the platform holders.

27 All in all, forms of player production have historically enjoyed little support from the console manufacturers. In the past few years, the strategies of platform holders have, however, started to change as the significance of players' productive potentials has finally been acknowledged. The development is partly due to the success stories from the more open PC environment. It is also connected to the fact that the current generation video game consoles are powerful computers: not only do they have as much computing power as a standard PC but they are also equipped with large storage space and connected to the internet (Zittrain, 2008). The network connection has quickly extended the uses associated with videogame consoles. While the 1980′s already witnessed some experiments with downloadable console content [2], it is the late emergence of hard drives and manufacturers' proprietary networks that has really boosted the possibilities invested in digital distribution. The console networks have both allowed easy updates for the software and created an entirely new market for downloadable games and other content. At the same time, it seems that the new features have significantly extended the number of potential console game producers.

28 To exemplify the recent development, we only need to take a look at the Microsoft press release from August 2006 that describes the future of console gaming in the following manner:

29 > In the 30 years of video game development, the art of making console games has been reserved for those with big projects, big budgets and the backing of big game labels. [—] XNA Game Studio Express will democratize game development by delivering the necessary tools to hobbyists, students, indie developers and studios alike to help them bring their creative game ideas to life while nurturing game development talent, collaboration and sharing that will benefit the entire industry [3].

30 Strikingly similar rhetoric can be found from a Nintendo press release from the early 2008:

31 > By reducing the barriers that make console game development prohibitively expensive, WiiWare showcases original ideas in the most democratic environment in industry history, connecting the people who make games more directly with the people who play them [4].

32 "Democratisation" is an ideologically loaded way to describe these new developments;Bogost (2008) points out that industry strategies – in most cases – do not deserve to be confused with self-governance and citizenship. Nevertheless, openly available tools provided by these two projects represent an aberration from the traditional policy that has seen the platform manufacturers strictly control the flow and quality of content onto their systems. While XNA and Wiiware are not primarily aimed for large player populations, but mostly for small development studios and game design students, they exemplify the new line of thinking that is gaining considerable traction and success in the console market.

33 While mod-savvy PC game developers realised the benefits of player-made modifications over a decade ago, developer-supported and manufacturer-acknowledged content mods on consoles are a somewhat recent entrant. As recent as 2005, the Californian game developer Tecmo sued ninjahacker.net, an online community dedicated to creating custom content and modifications for Xbox games. The community members had created their own "skins" to Tecmo titles, including *Ninja Gaiden* (Team Ninja, 2004), *Dead or Alive 3* (Team Ninja, 2005), and *Dead or Alive Xtreme Beach*

Volleyball (Team Ninja, 2003) and used the website to swap skins and share expert information on how to change the appearance of game characters. In his telling but somewhat questionable accusation the company spokesperson stated: 'we spent millions of dollars to develop these games, and people are coming in and changing the code to their liking, and that's illegal' [5]. This announcement somewhat epitomises the "old paradigm" that is based on distrust and excludes the forms of mutual co-operation between developers and players.

34 PC game modding, as we know it today, can be seen to originate from the genre of first-person shooters (Laukkanen, 2005). Therefore, it is no surprise that the first line of modder-friendly console games came from known FPS developers. In late 2007, Epic Games vice president Mark Rein announced a release of the very first user-created map for Epic's (2008) *Unreal Tournament 3* on PS3. Rein, known for his flamboyant rhetoric, described this as 'the first bold step in a new era' [6]. At the time of writing, over two years after Epic's announcement, Ut3mod.com, the central website dedicated for PS3 mods, hosts a variety of content ranging from different kinds of maps and game types to player designed character models, weapons and vehicles. One should, however, pay attention to the fact that the relatively complex tools used for UT3 mod-making are still PC-based. In this respect, the means of production and the means of consumption are becoming differentiated. This is worth noting as traditionally the very machine running the software has also been used for modifying games. Furthermore, there is no in-game menu for downloading modification but players need to scour the dedicated websites to find the player-made projects [7].

35 Altogether, while the level of innovation embedded in the UT3 mods is relatively high, there are still significant obstacles with the accessibility. The same seems to apply to another FPS game that lets its players create their own content. *Halo 3* (Bungie, 2007), part of the praised Halo (2001-) series, is developed by Bungie exclusively for the Xbox 360 console. The game includes a built-in map-tweaking utility called Forge. The editor allows players to open up any standard *Halo 3* map and add elements from a variety of categories. The maps created in Forge can be further optimised with the extensive gametype customisation options available in *Halo 3*. While the editor is available in-game, the players interested in downloading player-made maps need to direct their browsers to bungie.net. Again, the access to maps is not as straightforward as one would hope as getting a custom map to your game requires finding it from the website, signing in with a Windows Live ID and linking your Windows Live ID to your Xbox Live Gamertag. While experienced FPS players may not find this too demanding, the procedure does not lend itself well to other games or inexperienced players.

36 Alongside with the FPS tradition, more "casual" examples of customised console content have started to emerge. The PS3 version of the trivia game *Buzz!* includes 5000 trivia questions on the disc and further quiz packs can be downloaded via PlayStation Network. In addition to this, players can create their own questions at Mybuzzquiz.com and share them with the community. The player-made questionnaires can be downloaded straight into the in-game menu for free. At the time of writing more than 200,000 player-made quizzes are available for the PS3 players. While the text editor for making *Buzz!* questionnaires is easy and quick to use players still need to use the web browser to access the editor.

37 So far none of the examples have provided a cycle that can be experienced entirely on console. In every case either the development of playable content or its distribution is still tied to the networked PC environment. Thus, while *LBP* is not the first console game with official support for player-created content, at this point the combination of an easy-to-use editor operated with the console controller and an in-game distribution scheme sets it aside as unique [8].

The Game as a Platform and a Service

39 In an interview conducted after the launch of the game, *LBP* producer Siobhan Reddy stated that Media Molecule considers the game primarily a platform [9]. This statement can be understood in two different ways. First of all, the platform metaphor can be utilised to emphasize the importance of the game's customisable nature. The game provides not only a narrative world designed for the player to explore but as discussed, it also serves as a platform for the creative prospects of the players.

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Secondly, the "game as platform" rhetoric refers to Media Molecule's approach to season *LBP* experience with content familiar from other PS3 exclusives. The first major level pack made available through PlayStation Store included levels inspired by the *Metal Gear Solid* (Konami, 1998-) franchise. Media Molecule's collaboration with Konami also resulted in a *MGS* Premium Costume Pack that allowed players to dress their Sackboys or Sackgirls as Solid Snake and other characters from the *MGS* world. So far the list of downloadable packs includes content for example from the following games: *God of War* (SCE Studios, 2005)*, Heavenly Sword* (Ninja Theory, 2007)*, InFamous* (Sucker Punch Productions, 2009)*, Killzone 2* (Guerrilla Games, 2009)*, LocoRoco* (Japan Studio, 2006)*, MotorStorm* (Evolution Studios, 2007)*, Patapon* (Pyramid, 2008) and *Resistance 2* (Insomniac Games, 2008) [10]. Thus, Media Molecule and Sony openly use *LBP* as a marketing platform. Integrating all these games, most of them exclusively developed for Sony's consoles, with the touching and witty *LBP* universe provides a new kind of appeal even to the more hardcore titles. As some of the downloadable packs update the features available in the create mode, the branded content increasingly finds it way also to the levels designed by the players.

41 As the examples above indicate, designing the game as an updatable platform opens up room for various kinds of extensions. As a consequence, *LBP* hosts side by side professionally produced branded content and projects created by the players [11]. Thus, the role of players is at least twofold: on one hand they are celebrated as skilful producers and on the other hand they become addressed as an audience for Sony's marketing purposes. As the political economists have shown decades ago, the audience is often the main commodity produced by commercial media. In other words, an important function of the media product – in our case the console game – is to assemble a group of people to whom advertisers can sell more products. Furthermore, with the advent of real-time information networks the role of users is getting increasingly diversified. As van Dijck (2009: 47) points out in relation to popular user-generated-content platforms like YouTube, the users operate both as content producers and data producers. Besides uploading their videos to the service, users at the same time provide all kinds of information concerning their behaviour and profile to the platform owners and metadata aggregators. The networked console operates somewhat similarly providing the console manufacturer with a continuous flow of data about the players. This data, ranging from buying habits to play preferences, can be further used to monitor the player and for example to personalise the marketing messages.

42 According to Jeremy Rifkin (2005) many companies have for some time now been actively moving away from products as fixed items and are aiming to rely entirely on 'platforms' that are open to upgrades and value-added services. An interview with the Media Molecule co-founder Alex Evans reveals that at Media Molecule *LBP* is considered 'as much as a "service" as it is a videogame title' [12]. There are, once again, several ways to interpret this statement. First of all, console game expansions are becoming increasingly prevalent, particularly due to the proprietary online services. As discussed, PlayStation Store has provided *LBP*-related additional content since the launch of the game. In this respect, the economic model is moving from a single payment towards an incremental or cyclical payment and the consumer is encouraged to be in frequent contact with the seller. Then again, business-wise, the objective behind the flow of upgrades and add-ons is not only to create some additional revenue but perhaps even more importantly to create a long-term service relationship with the customer (Stenros and Sotamaa, 2009).

Over One Million Levels Later

43 It was clear from the beginning of this study that a title so dramatically dependent on the player's contributions could not be analysed before a significant number of levels had been generated. In February 2010, some 16 months after the launch of the game, Sony announced that there were over 2 million levels designed by the players of *LBP*. The sheer quantity and variety of player made projects provides the scope to sketch a detailed, multi-sited perspective on the game.

44 Importantly, Media Molecule has given up the strict focus on in-game features. The developer has provided a browser-based blueprint maker tool to facilitate the design process. This suggests that creating levels is not exactly child's play but requires serious effort and pre-planning. The extensive quantity of player-made levels also makes finding and selecting fitting levels increasingly difficult. Related to this, the company representatives have talked about a launch a web-based portal that would help players to find other creators' contributions and to advertise their own levels [13].

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While most players appreciate the dedication of Media Molecule, the first year of the symbiosis has not been entirely without controversies. Unsurprisingly, the central source of friction has been the third party copyrights. A number of levels that have infringed on copyrighted intellectual property have been canned. The hesitancy to take any risks with the content is most probably largely up to the platform holder Sony as already the delay in the launch of the title suggests [14]. The players who have spent hours with their creations have openly expressed their dissatisfaction especially concerning the way the levels have been cut without prior notice or any explanation. The majority of the criticism coming from players has been over the lack of clearly defined criteria for what will cause a level to be deleted. Sony has promised to make these definitions clearer but also recommended players to steer clear of providing levels with inappropriate content or content that infringes on existing copyrights [15].

46 *LBP* illustrates Lev Manovich's (2001, 258) idea of how in the case of new media it is often hard to establish the boundary between production tools and media objects. For their part, Katie Salen and Eric Zimmerman (2003) use the term 'transformative play' to describe the players' ability to appropriate the playgrounds, to innovate new tactics and to change the rules of the game. Transformative play is 'a special case of play that occurs when the free movement of play alters the more rigid structure in which it takes shape' (2003, 321). As discussed in this article, *LBP* effectively builds this transformative play into its design. Yet at the same time, *LBP* forces us to ask what exactly qualifies as transformative play: as level editing and object making become part of the intended use of the software, the subversive dimension of these actions are thrown into question.

47 Obviously players can still oppose the "correct" use of the software. There are intentionally boring or practically impossible levels. Quite a few of the published levels are also unfinished or include major inconsistencies. Furthermore, instead of creating levels for other players to enjoy, players can use them for their own personal purposes that I will discuss in detail a little later. In any case, the player production associated with *LBP* is not so much about hacking or reverse engineering the software but rather an anticipated use of the gaming software. Adam Arvidsson and Kjetil Sandvik (2007) suggest that in the case of digital games, agency and freedom may no more be taken as sources of resistance against the cultural industries as agency has become a pre-programmed feature of the corporate media environment in which subjectification occurs. While I agree that cultural studies need to 'abandon the habit of equating agency and freedom with resistance and critique' (Arvidsson and Sandvik, 102), I see no need for overtly pessimistic or gloomy conclusions.

48 Allowing players to create their own content is never entirely without its controversies, however, the benefits for the developer are pretty clear. The continuous flow of new *LBP* levels obviously improves the replay value of the game and at the same time extends the potential shelf life of the title. Following the logic of Arvidsson and Sandvik, Media Molecule's attempt to capitalise on transformative play is solely about incorporation – about corporate power "squeezing" the fruits of game culture into its reserves. I suggest that such a position is an unnecessary oversimplification. As John Banks (2005) suggests, players are often well aware of the practices designed for exploiting their labour. As the co-operative relations between players and developers evolve, some players become experienced practitioners capable of negotiating more favourable terms for their works.

49 Prior to the launch of the game, Media Molecule representatives admitted that they were looking forward to recruiting some of the best designers of the player community. A year after the launch, they reported that a new level designer coming from the player community had been hired. Before this Media Molecule had already hired the team behind one fansite to build and run the official *LBP* community site [16]. In addition, LittleBig Planet: Game of the Year Edition (Media Molecule, 2009), was shipped with 18 player-created levels. Furthermore, even though Media Molecule and Sony have been relatively silent about the future of *LBP*, speculations indicate that the best player-created levels could became liable to charge at some point [17]. If the critical mass of players grows into an appropriate scale, a micropayment-based model could actually provide a basis for a mutually beneficial relationship between player-creators and the developer.

50 All in all, it is clear that the monetary compensations relate to a very small minority of players. This also reminds us of the fact that the availability of tools and distribution channels does not automatically turn all players into producers. In this respect, it may be useful to distinguish

between different levels of participation. Following a popular rule of thumb, we can assume that a relatively little group of players has the skill and inclination to produce levels of high complexity. A much larger group of players presumably spends some time with the editor and may come up with at least one small-scale project. Then there are players who do not create levels of their own but actively follow the scene and spend time on playing, evaluating and rating the levels created by other players. Finally, there is a large population of players who occasionally download and play a player-created level or two. If we intend to understand the significance of player production to the player experience, all the different positions need to be taken into account. On the one hand, it is apparent that participation does not equal active contribution (van Dijck, 2009: 44). On the other hand, the experience of large player populations is without doubt affected by the results of voluntary level-designers.

51 In their article on co-creation, Banks and Sal Humphreys (2008: 402) argue that 'the unpaid labour of the user-producers (for example the player-creators in computer games), wields its own form of power'. While this power may be different to that wielded by professional developers, this agency should not be underestimated. To further examine the powers exercised by the players, the following section considers the entirely new uses *LBP* players create for the game.

Producing New Uses for Games

53 Within the variety of player-made *LBP* levels, a diverse collection of projects is revealed. The atmosphere and style of the levels ranges from frisky and perky to spooky and gloomy. Some of the vehicle rides, ramps and roller coasters provide quite an adrenaline rush. At the same time, the more puzzle-like levels force players to stop and ponder their moves. Alongside obstacle courses that are similar to the official levels, the players can also choose to play, for example, a quiz or a pinball. Similar to the official downloadable content, many levels seek inspiration from other games and popular media. Remakes of classic platform games seem to be popular but influences from a wide variety of other games – *Halo*, *Mirror's Edge* (Digital Illusions, 2008), *Ico* (Team Ico, 2001), and *Tetris* (Pazhitnov, 1984) to mention but a few – can be found as well. As if this was not enough, some player levels also include unique objects that shift the purpose of the game into something completely different. Different kinds of music-related levels form one of the visible trends among the community. Some players have created relatively complex machines that replicate the principles of a phonograph or a barrel organ. In addition, complete levels can be used for reproducing known musical pieces. The editor allows players to place triggers that activate individual sounds when the player reaches a certain point in the level. If the player meets the consecutive triggers in the right pace the sounds constitute a recognisable melody. The examples range from game theme songs to Guns N' Roses.

54 The most popular player levels that have been downloaded and played hundreds of thousands of times are counterbalanced by a flock of levels that have much more subtle and mundane motivations behind them. Many players have figured out that the levels can be used to pass on personal messages like wishing happy birthday or merry Christmas. In these occasions, the game takes a communicative function and the intended audience can consists of only a few people. Related to the many uses of digital games, Ian Bogost (2008) has made an insightful comparison between today's computer culture and the emergence of affordable and easy-to-use cameras in the turn of the 20th century. If taking photographs was still in late 19th century expensive and required professional expertise, the introduction of Kodak Brownie camera changed the scene significantly. The camera was relatively cheap and no dark room was needed for developing photos. Making photography widely available also produced a new kind of picture, the snapshot. A snapshot can be described as a photograph that is shot spontaneously to capture memorable moments of everyday life. As Bogost formulates: 'snapshots value ease of capture and personal value of photographs over artistic or social value'. Now if we turn our attention to the *LBP* levels discussed above, interestingly similar motivations can be found behind them.

55 One more example of a level that may not be played by many but surely has significance to its creator is a level titled 'Love and Marriage'. According to the YouTube entry, the designer used the level to propose his girlfriend. [18] The level actually requires the player to answer the question 'will you marry me' to proceed to the end of the level. The successful snapshot levels, primarily designed for audiences of one or two or ten include personal things that have a particular significance for their players. As Bogost argues, the outcome of this work is not important because

it generates quality games. Instead, these levels are important as they hold meaning for their designers and their kin. In this respect, one should remember that while most of the *LBP* levels may not qualify as high quality games in a traditional sense, they can still very well be good games for their designers and their carefully chosen players.

56 One term the academic literature has recently coined to explain the dynamics of game cultures is 'gaming capital' (Consalvo, 2007). The term is a reworking of Bourdieu's 'cultural capital' and refers to being knowledgeable and having opinions about games-related things and sharing this information with others interested in games (Bourdieu 1984, Consalvo 2007). The advantage of 'gaming capital' is that the concept offers a way to examine the range of player activities together. The ways of gaining gaming capital are not limited to playing games but the games-related productive activities that are appreciated in the player's social circle can as well become sources of gaming capital (Sotamaa 2009).

57 Traditionally the "console gaming capital" has been mostly gained by playing and by being knowledgeable about games. In the case of *LBP*, gaining this flexible currency is, however, obviously not limited to mere playing but the productive inclinations can as well accumulate one's gaming capital. In fact, in relation to *LBP*, the playing itself may not even be the primary route for accumulating gaming capital. The cuddly and somewhat wacky style of the game does not necessarily lend itself to a "hardcore' audience. A look to the community websites confirms that it is not the skilled players but the imaginative levels that are celebrated. It is also worth recognising that the developer's post-launch player support is very clearly focused to the players' productive activities.

58 The reward systems recently introduced to various gaming platforms make gaming capital quantifiable and visible in new ways. *LBP* design follows the PS3 trophy system by rewarding players from a variety of achievements in the game. In general, developers often use the rewards to extend the replay value of the game. Rewards can also be used to direct the attention of the players to particular features of the game. Similar to many other games, *LBP* awards both basic level completion and various more exceptional stunts. Added to that, a variety of trophies require the player to create (customise the character, create a character, create a level etc.) and share (publish a level, tag, rate and comment other players' levels etc.). Thus, while in most PS3 games the trophies are connected to particular in-game tasks, in the case of *LBP* even the trophies actively encourage players to familiarise themselves with the different levels of participation.

59 Interestingly, the *LBP* trophies also provide a basis for inventive and somewhat transformative player designs. Earning the trophies is not limited to the original levels and, therefore, in some cases the player-created levels can significantly ease the achievement of the relatively difficult trophies. For example, the trophies that require the player to travel very fast (Incredible speed trophy) or to travel very high (Incredible height trophy) can be earned in seconds with the help of player-designed rocket engines. One could say that the "trophy-heavy" levels that guarantee the player a list of trophies in a few seconds actually form a genre of their own within the player creations. Based on the discussion forums, the players interestingly disagree whether these levels should be seen as elegant exploits of the PS3 achievement system or as resources used only by the cheapest cheaters. Whatever the case, these examples highlight how the creations of players can in a very concrete way play with and redefine the dynamics of the system imposed by the industry [19].

Conclusion

60 Based on the observations made in this article, there are reasons to argue that the recent developments in the console market have turned the latest generation consoles into an increasingly inviting platform for different forms of player production. It is, however, worth noting that the new options available for players do not automatically make all of them active participants but instead, a variety of different roles can be identified. Alongside the small group of *LBP* players who dedicate a lot of time and energy on designing levels, there are a variety of players who season their experience with playing, rating, commenting and examining these levels. All these roles are important for the community but represent significantly different experiences. It seems that the basic motivations and community dynamics remain relatively similar to those familiar from PC game modding. For the especially skilled player-developers, the game provides an inviting platform to showcase their talent, earn fame and even potential recruitment. For the majority of

players, the level editor is still more of a software toy that allows them to create small-scale experiments and instant social fun.

61 If we now return to the argument of Jonathan Zittrain concerning the "tethered" nature of the game console the result is somewhat twofold. At first glance the "freedom" and "democracy" promised for the players seems rather limited. The new openings are obviously not available for every development studio as they require very close co-operation with the platform holder. For the players the chance to create something unique includes a set of trade-offs. Even the most innovative player-made games remain available only to those who can gain access to a PS3 console and a copy of *LBP*. At the same time, all the player activities produce information that can be collected, stored and further utilized by the platform holder. While the potential for transformation and controversy is obviously not entirely erased, the room for altering the rigid structure defined by the platform manufacturers seems somewhat limited. At the same time, while examples like *LBP* do not allow radical reprogramming of the console environment they can open up more subtle ways of repurposing the console. As discussed, the player-created levels can for example turn the game into a channel of intimate communication or question the reward systems designed to direct the player behaviour. In this respect, Zittrain's categorical division between "generative" and "tethered" seems too rigid. More nuanced and less dichotomous models are needed if we want to further understand the complexities shaping co-creative relations in the future console design space.

62 The people who purchase *LBP* Game of the Year Edition, released in autumn 2009, are invited to test the online beta of a game titled *ModNation Racers* (United Front Games, 2010). This PS3 exclusive kart racing game uses the very same three word slogan familiar from *LBP*. In this respect, there are good reasons to believe that in the following years the console gamers are more often invited to not only to play, but also to create and to share. At the same time, it is important to see behind the celebratory ethos of the console manufacturers and to pay attention to how player agency is negotiated in the different phases of the console game lifecycle.

Notes

[1] For the detailed sales figures see: https://www.vgchartz.com/swlaunch.php?game1=LittleBigPlanet%20-%20PS3[12390

[2] Early experiments include such projects as the CVC GameLine (Control Video Corporation), a cartridge for the Atari 2600 which could download games using a telephone line and PlayCable: The All Game Channel that enabled local cable operators to send Intellivision games over the wire with the TV signal

[3] https://www.microsoft.com/presspass/press/2006/aug06/08-13XNAGameStudioPR.mspx

[4] https://www.nintendo.com/whatsnew/detail/3jT8hMPXjM2IaFJ0E87G7EMDyYoUtXwn

[5] https://www.securityfocus.com/news/10466?ref=rss

[6] https://utforums.epicgames.com/showthread.php?t=593988

[7] Somewhat confusingly, the mods cannot be downloaded straight to the PS3 hard drive but the players need to use a USB memory stick or any other external memory device that is readable by PS3.

[8] *Guitar Hero: World Tour* (2008), launched approximately at the same time as *LBP*, provides its players with somewhat similar features. The in-game "Music Studio" can be used to create player's own tunes. The songs can be further uploaded to the GH Tunes service and after this they are available for all GH players via an in-game menu. Unlike in the case of *LBP*, no real effort is made to integrate the editor to the game modes and therefore for the most players the editor remains a curiosity.

[9] https://videogames.yahoo.com/news-1263292

[10] https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/List_of_LittleBigPlanet_downloadable_content_packs

[11] The situation bears some resemblance to the PC game industry in which the game engines are used to run the player-created modifications and at the same time licensed for commercial projects.

[12] https://www.gamesindustry.biz/articles/littlebigplanet-it-s-a-service-as-much-as-a-game

[13] https://www.1up.com/do/newsStory?cId=3174332

[14] The game was originally intended for a mid-to-late October release but a problem involving a licensed song in the game's soundtrack caused a last-minute delay in the worldwide release. Sony recalled all copies sent to retailers after audio samples from Muslim religious text the Qur'an were discovered in the game's soundtrack. For more see: https://www.gamasutra.com/php-bin/news_index.php?story=20708

[15] https://www.escapistmagazine.com/news/view/87394-LittleBigPlanet-Levels-Getting-Axed

[16] https://www.mediamolecule.com/2009/11/18/littlebigplanet-com-relaunches-as-a-community-site/

[17] https://www.1up.com/do/newsStory?cId=3168914

[18] https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Mf2iGG9uTZY

[19] This is particularly interesting as we remember that for example the XNA games on Xbox360 do not support achievements (the Xbox Live reward system) at all.

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