

Let Me Take You to *The Movies*

Productive Players, Commodification and Transformative Play

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Abstract

This article examines the contested issue of player productivity, with a focus on the multifaceted relations between players and the game industry. These relations are explored using the movie studio simulation *The Movies* (Lionhead Studios, 2005) as a case study. Firstly, through an examination of the game, some of the prevailing game industry's practices, and their relations to the ones applied amongst other creative industries (particularly the film industry) are introduced. Secondly, the game, and especially the accompanying moviemaking editor, is analysed from the perspective of 'transformative play'. Further, the reasons behind, and consequences of, allowing the players to make and distribute short movies of their own are contemplated. Finally the article addresses the mechanisms of control and reward that are applied by the corporate actors in relation to *The Movies*. The article suggests that in the age of commodified play, players face trade-offs all the time. Therefore, the study of rules that has become central in game studies has to be expanded to the 'out-game rules' defined by the corporate players.

Introduction

Over the past couple of decades, computer and video games have become a multi-billion dollar industry. When compared to other digital media sectors, the game industry is arguably the longest established and most economically successful (Dovey and Kennedy, 2006: 46). The growth of the game industry and the increased competition for market shares has led to adapting a range of business strategies that aim to increase the returns and reduce the risks involved in developing digital games. Many of these strategies – e.g. media consolidation, franchising, licensing and sequels – are very similar to those practised among other cultural industries. As Kerr plainly puts it: 'From an economic perspective they [games] are merely commodities, created as cheaply as possible and sold in those markets that are rich enough to afford them' (Kerr, 2006: 1). Yet games are different and make a difference. The digital playgrounds have a potential to reformulate

the ways in which we understand the relations between media, producers and users. Further, I suggest the study of current digital games can provide an important contribution to our understanding of the conditions in which we communicate, have fun and express ourselves.

In addition to importing procedures from other industries, the game industry is very efficient in subsuming the activities of players into the development of its products. Computer games are, in the first place, inherently 'configurative' and 'participatory'. Games draw on players' inputs and offer rewards and feedback. The configurative investment of players is not limited to productive in-game actions, but takes various forms among game cultures, visible, for example, on the multitude of games-related websites and internet fora. At the same time, the game industry constantly introduces new strategies that aim to benefit from this voluntary work of the players. Thus, games are actively developing new models where texts, players and developers form complicated networks, and the power relations between these actors are constantly negotiated and re-evaluated. In the centre of these models are the computer-savvy players and their productivity.

The collaborative and mutually beneficial relationship between avid players and game developers has not gone completely unnoticed in the recent academic literature. First of all, the current developments have been claimed to be the culminating point of user-centred design and a site of radical democratization of innovation processes (Jeppesen, 2004; von Hippel, 2005). On the other hand, computer and video games have recently been used to exemplify the mobilization of 'immaterial labour' in post-Fordist production processes. It has been argued that the computer game industry is inherently dependent on the free labour of game hobbyists (de Peuter and Dyer-Witheford, 2005; Kücklich, 2005). Whichever standpoint one adopts, it seems obvious that computer games actively question the boundaries between such key distinctions as play and work, leisure and labour, and production and consumption.

What I seek to explore in this article is the contested issue of player productivity. I am particularly interested in the multifaceted relations between players and the game industry and the control mechanisms applied by the corporate actors. To illustrate the complex conventions of the game industry and the ways in which players are woven into its fabric, I will examine the movie studio simulation *The Movies* (Lionhead Studios, 2005). The game provides a rich case study for outlining some of the current industry practices and for discussing the tensions attached to them. In order to identify the potentially new qualities, it is necessary to first take a look at the strategies that are similar to other cultural industries. The game is therefore firstly examined to introduce some of the prevailing game industry practices and their relation to the ones applied among other creative industries, particularly the film industry. Secondly, I consider the reasons behind, and consequences of, allowing players to make and distribute short movies of their own. Finally, *The Movies* also allows us to examine how the transformation of games into multi-billion dollar business actually affects the circumstances in which we play and make culture.

Game Cultures and Productive Players

From a cultural perspective, digital games should be understood simultaneously as designed artefacts and emergent culture (Steinkuehler, 2006).¹ Thus, contemporary

games are artefacts that consist of millions of lines of code and are sold to consumers as commodities. These artefacts are always socially shaped and influenced by particular cultures of production and design. Further, games are shaped on various levels by the use of the players, by the very fact that they are played. At the same time, the productive engagement of players with games generates emergent practices, social networks and whole new forms of culture.

Game cultures importantly participate in the emergence of self-produced media, typically created with increasingly affordable digital equipment and software and distributed via specialty websites. The change from centralized types of media, production and innovation towards more fragmented and de-centralized models has led to a situation where consumers (in our case players) possess the potential to become agents of cultural production.² Indicatively, this development has inspired scholars to introduce a variety of new outlines and terms: 'prosumer', proposed by Lister et al. (2003), brings together the concepts of consumer and producer, while 'Pro-Am' (Leadbeater and Miller, 2004) is a portmanteau of professional and amateur. At the same time, the work of these new producers – from computer-savvy individuals and internet-supported hobby groups to independent non-profit organizations and commercial start-ups – has been suggested to be a model example of 'immaterial labour' and 'multitude' extensively discussed among autonomist theorists (Terranova, 2000; de Peuter and Dyer-Witthoford, 2005 [particularly on games]). While I find these parallel discussions highly relevant to the study of digital games, they need to be supplemented with more game-specific arguments.

Recent discussion among game scholars indicates that the productivity of players is integrally tied to the ways in which games are understood and conceptualized in general. In her inspiring article, Pearce (2006) argues that most game studies have inherited the assumption that games are, by definition, 'unproductive'. Pearce refers to the influence of the two canonical texts of play, Johan Huizinga's *Homo Ludens* and Roger Callois's *Man, Play and Games*, and questions this starting point by claiming that, in fact, play has a productive character of its own. In a similar manner Juul (2005) questions the 'classical' definitions of games and goes on to claim that instead of being 'separate' or 'unproductive', games are characterized as activities with negotiable consequences. This discussion is closely connected to the idea of the 'magic circle' and to the ways we understand the relationship between gaming situations and 'normal' life. In their critical analysis Pargman and Jakobsson (2006) pay attention to the relative popularity of the term 'magic circle' in game studies. The term, originally introduced by Huizinga, refers to the nature of play as something special, magical and outside ordinary life. Pargman and Jakobsson go on to claim that the continual use of the term, although often simultaneously problematized, has led to an examination of gaming situations in isolation, as singular events (2006: 21).

It is clear that we need more studies that situate players and playing in relation to the complicated and diverse contexts of everyday life. We need to ask why players are so eager to invest their time and energy in playing. What do we mean when we talk about game cultures? What is the significance of various out-game activities exercised by players? Is there a difference between play and non-play and is that distinction necessary? At the same time we need to pay attention to the industrial context of digital games by posing questions about the motivations and practices behind contemporary games. What is the relationship between players and designers? How does the games industry

support the activities of productive players and what are the implications of having such agents around? What about the entitlements players have to their creations?

In connection with digital games, the productive nature of player activities is visible in a number of ways. Humphreys (2004) offers an excellent preliminary understanding of the dimensions of player productivity:

The basic ergodic nature of the game text requires player input in order to advance the game. [. . .] Players are also a source of feedback and suggestions; act as quasi bug-testers; are active on game bulletin boards; interact with developers in ways vital to the developer in their ongoing production and design of the game; create websites with information and guides to the games, which also generate discussion and feedback. Finally there are the social and community investments of players that build important structural features such as the social networks found in guilds, and long-term friendships and team-like relationships that lead to player retention in the game. (Humphreys, 2004: 2–3)

The significance of productive player actions has lately been highlighted especially in connection to massively multiplayer online games (Humphreys, 2005; Herman et al., 2006; Pearce, 2006; Taylor, 2006). One aim of this article is to consider the relevance of these discussions from the perspective of a particular single-player PC game.

Open-ended and non-linear games have recently been discussed under the notion of *emergence*. At the same time, productive player actions have gained attention as *emergent gameplay*. In general, emergence refers to the development of something complex from simple constituent parts. In connection with games, emergence is usually associated with players' freedom to use different strategies, and especially with unexpected and surprising behaviour. The term is, however, used relatively loosely. According to Juul (2005: 73–82) even scientific literature on emergence is contradictory and there is no clear consensus on whether emergence is a feature of game systems or a result of (unexpected) player behaviour. Once we add to this the notion that the term *gameplay* is equally unsettled, it is clear that the use of *emergent gameplay* would require considerable caution. Therefore, for the purposes of this article I prefer the term *transformative play*. Salen and Zimmerman describe transformative play as 'a special case of play that occurs when the free movement of play alters the more rigid structure in which it takes shape' (2004: 321). Transformative play is about players appropriating the playgrounds, innovating new tactics and changing the rules. A narrow interpretation of transformative play would focus on understanding games as systems that can be manipulated by players. The approach applied in this article is broader and suggests that transformative play can expand outside gameworlds and bring aspects of play outside the immediate playing experience.

One example of players using computer game technology in ways not initially anticipated by the designers is *machinima* – the making of animated movies with computer games. In the case of *machinima*, the software itself becomes a field of play as computer-savvy gamers experiment with the possibilities the code possesses. Thus, one way to understand *machinima* is to see it as a replacement of one game structure – playing to win – with another – making a movie (Lowood, 2005: 13). It has also been suggested that the model of transformative play can offer insights into the productive actions of non-gaming communities. If we assume that the consumption of film allows a certain amount of play through interpretation, then the making of fan fiction becomes an act of transformative play. The important particularity of games, however, originates

from the fact that, unlike other media, digital games build this transformative play into their design (Jones, 2006: 264). I will return to this later, but in this connection it is important to take one more look at earlier academic discussions in cultural studies, particularly those reassessing the traditions of fan culture research and subcultural studies. I suggest they can bring some valuable sense of proportion to the discussion.

Jenkins (2006: 11–12) has suggested that there are different generations of scholars within fandom, and that their works should be understood in relation to the moments they are/were working. Today, Jenkins openly admits that parts of his seminal early work *Textual Poachers* (1992) served as defences of fandom and were born out of his frustration with the earlier theorizing of fan cultures. However, it could be argued that development phases like this have importantly paved the way for so-called third generation fan scholars who can write more openly and critically without the need to defend the fan community. Similarly, subcultural studies have witnessed a development where theories of ‘resistance’ and ‘rebellion’ have made room for less-heroic ‘post-subcultural’ approaches that do not attempt to map the current youth cultures back to such socio-structural variables as class, but instead establish a more diversified and importantly anti-essentialist basis for the study of subcultures (Weinzierl and Muggleton, 2003). In this context I suggest that, while the low cultural status of games can be bothersome for game studies scholars, one should not overestimate the positive and progressive features of game cultures. While some of the productive actions of players result in beautiful and noble outcomes, players don’t necessarily have to behave nicely. Instead, players can appear as unruly and reactionary. In order to understand this diversity it is important to avoid the celebratory ethos. Further, players are neither entirely vulnerable to the game industry strategies nor completely uncompelled in their actions. Therefore, research should neither over-emphasize the resistant dimensions of player actions nor deny the potential for opposing attitudes.

***The Movies* and Game Industry Strategies**

In this section, I explore *The Movies* game in detail. Along with describing the basic elements of the game, I discuss some aspects of the complex relation between the game and film industries. *The Movies* is a business-management ‘tycoon’, released in November 2005. The PC game is produced by the UK developer Lionhead Studios and published by Activision, one of the biggest international game publishers. In the game, the player runs her own Hollywood movie studio. The basic tasks include designing, maintaining and updating the studio lot, fostering the careers of the studio employees and, importantly, making movies. I suggest this versatile simulation can be seen as, amongst other things, an elementary course in the basic laws and processes of the Hollywood film industry. Curiously, some of the film industry aspects simulated in the game have their counterparts in the game industry. Therefore I will, in the following, at times shift between a close reading of the game and the macro level of the game industry. This is intended to help highlight the parallels between these two phenomena.

Discussing the similarities and differences between different cultural industries³ also allows us to debunk some myths often associated with the game industry. One of the most often repeated popular press claims concerning computer games suggests that game industry revenues have today exceeded those of the film industry. A closer

investigation proves this claim to be highly problematic. First of all, these comparisons normally use the figure of 'total game sales', which includes not only the sales of game software but also the sales of hardware like game consoles and other accessories. Secondly, popular comparisons often refer only to the box office receipts which constitute but a small share of total film revenues. Different sources prove that box office receipts account for only about 25 per cent of total film revenues, while 'secondary' revenue streams like VHS/DVD sales and rentals, and various television revenues, are responsible for the rest. All in all, international moving image revenues are still estimated to out-gross the leisure software sector by three to one (Dovey and Kennedy, 2006: 45; Kerr, 2006: 50). Despite this, synergies between the two media are obvious, and films and games operate increasingly in parallel in terms of exploiting the same franchises. Popular press accounts of games often compare them with the fruits of the film industry. Direct adaptations serve as the most obvious points of departure. It is true that Hollywood blockbusters are increasingly transformed into digital games and vice versa. Marketing costs, for example, can be drastically reduced by capitalizing on narratives, characters, and motives drawn from pre-existing products of popular culture.

Moving on to take a closer look at *The Movies*, the objective of the game is to develop a small upstart movie studio of the 1920s into an industry leader. The player starts with an empty lot that is filled through the decades with production facilities, sets and other buildings.

One key to success in the game is a balanced division of labour. In addition to a couple of directors and actors, the player has to pick extras and film crew members. However, in order to make her studio competitive, the player also has to hire builders, janitors, assistants, scriptwriters and scientists. The contribution and experience of all these employees ultimately contributes to whether the film ends up being a hit or a flop. Over time, the movies get more sophisticated, productions get bigger and more employees have to be hired.

Similarly, bigger development teams (and thus steadily rising production and marketing costs) can be singled out as one of the most noticeable recent game industry trends (Kerr, 2006: 66). Game design has turned from a skill of the few to a huge combined effort: a high-profile game project requires dozens or even hundreds of people, a wide variety of expertise, a Hollywood-size budget and a timescale of two to three years. In addition to programmers and designers who are mainly responsible for the digital code, no single game is finalized without the input of a variety of other people, from game-testers to packaging personnel (Ruggill et al., 2004: 299; de Peuter and Dyer-Witthof, 2005). Thus, game development is, for the most part, quite far removed from the glamorous image often associated with the creative industries. Rather than writing code while sipping lattes, a significant proportion of those involved in the industry work on temporary contracts and barely make a minimum wage.

After building the facilities and hiring talented staff, a player of *The Movies* can start to script, rehearse, film and release movies. As in 'life simulations' such as *The Sims*, the most important thing is to keep the studio employees busy, unstressed and happy. In order to keep actors and directors in a positive mood, the player has to ensure that they get a reasonable salary, fashionable clothes, a quality trailer and a lively entourage. Otherwise, stars can become stressed, alcoholics or over-eaters and lose their popularity. All these variables have an influence on the rating of the studio and the movies it produces.

In true Hollywood style the popularity of stars can be affected by manipulating their looks with liposuction or plastic surgery.

In marketing the game, the most important star, however, is obviously Peter Molyneux, the head of Lionhead Studios. Molyneux is one of the leading figures in the UK game industry and has even been awarded an OBE (Order of the British Empire) for his work in the industry. To the hordes of gamers, Molyneux is familiar from such popular and critically acclaimed games as *Populous* (1989), *Black & White* (2001) and *Fable* (2004). It is not a coincidence that many gamers recognize these games particularly as Peter Molyneux games since the name of the veteran developer is actively used throughout the marketing of the titles. *The Movies* is no exception – even before the game was launched the project was widely recognized as ‘Peter Molyneux’s *The Movies*’. It is obvious that over the years Molyneux’s role has changed from lead designer responsible for the actual development of the software, to more of a publicist whose tasks include lending his name and charisma to different projects. Here again, games come very close to film marketing where famous ‘auteurs’ or celebrity actors and actresses are utilized to sell the titles to the audiences. The high-profile name attached to the product comes to signify a certain quality.

The Movies follows the technological development of the movie industry through the decades. As a result, the first films are in black and white but the later ones allow the player to utilize things such as special props, computer-generated imagery and digital sound. One way to gain an advantage over rival studios and to increase the quality of your films is to invest in a research and development facility with enough staff, and to invent significant novelties before others. Further, the rankings of one’s masterpieces can be improved by adding the latest special effects and other technological gimmicks to the movies. Dependence on rapid technological development forms one more parallel between the game and the game industry in general. The influence of changing technological trends is most visible in the console game market, which is defined by so-called ‘hardware lifecycles’. What this means is that every four to five years the major platforms are so radically upgraded that developers face a very steep learning curve⁴ (Kerr, 2006: 57). This is also one of the reasons for the mushrooming development of team sizes, as noted earlier.

Hollywood movies can be divided into genres. This method of categorization associates particular media representations with each other based on generic conventions. A version of the genre system is involved in the simulated reality of *The Movies*. Once the player moves on to design the movies, she has five genres to choose from: comedy, action, romance, sci-fi and horror. The success of films can be influenced by carefully following industry trends and the popularity of different genres in different times. Based on their qualities and experience, certain actors and directors fit with particular genres better than others. At a general level, one function of all genre systems is to help audiences identify the pleasures they can expect from particular products. In this sense, it is no surprise that the products of the game industry are often referred to as ‘representators’ of particular genres. If we read the reviews, *The Movies* is in most cases a simulation, but it is discussed also as an ‘economic simulation’, ‘management game’, ‘tycoon’, ‘strategy game’ or ‘god game’. As this variety of possible choices indicates, the selection of game genres is based on very loosely defined conventions and different versions of this categorization exist.⁵ Further, market-based genres often overlap and games

appearing in the current market are increasingly hybrids drawing from a variety of sources in and beyond game cultures.

As mentioned earlier, the adopting of strategies familiar from other cultural industries is connected to the fact that only a small number of computer games make a profit. As in any other cultural industry the limited number of 'blockbusters' and 'hits' has to cover the cost of the titles that turn out to make no profit. As a result:

[P]ublishers tend to develop a broad catalogue or portfolio of titles across genres and platforms in order to ensure they have at least one successful title. They also tend to develop sequels to games and where possible to reuse core technologies. (Kerr, 2006: 69)

This development has led to a situation where publishers, in order to maximize their sales and control development and distribution, actively widen their ownership to include development studios and other related businesses. Lionhead Studios is a very interesting example of contemporary industry trends. Molyneux left his earlier company Bullfrog Productions in 1997, soon after the studio was purchased by the industry giant Electronic Arts. Thus, Lionhead started at least partly as a breakaway from the larger company structure that would possibly compromise the artistic freedom of the designer and development team. Tellingly, Lionhead Studios was sold to Microsoft in April 2006. This means that Lionhead Studios will in the future design their games exclusively for the Microsoft-owned Xbox 360 and Windows platforms. In the company press release, Molyneux himself issued the assurance that this acquisition was completed to guarantee Lionhead the economic stability needed in the contemporary market.⁶

In addition to utilizing strategies familiar from other cultural industries, the game industry has actively developed new business models. Be they subscription-based massively multiplayer games or player-made modifications to PC games, the new models highlight the significance of players' work. The implications of this development are explored in the following discussion where the role of both the moviemaking editor and the community website are examined to tease out the various functions and meanings attached to player-made movies.

Capitalizing on Transformative Play?

While playing *The Movies*, the player can choose how actively he/she will take part in the moviemaking process. The player can either let the software determine the contents of the film or decide to use the in-game moviemaking tools to design the details him/herself. In the automated mode the player simply hires script writers, chooses the genre, and casts the film. After a short rehearsal period the cast is ready for the shooting of the film. The moviemaking editor mode (*Advanced Movie Maker*) allows the player to create a detailed storyboard from pre-formatted scenes and locate the events in a variety of sets using various props. The player can create highly customized characters with the *StarMaker* software and manipulate their movements and expressions. In the post-production phase, items like personalized subtitles and sounds can also be added.

Thus, the moviemaking editor offers a variety of possibilities, and players may end up spending hours in perfecting their films. The problem from the gameplay perspective, as some reviews have rightly pointed out, is that the time spent in revising the details is not rewarded by the game. After a couple of attempts the player realizes that the films

produced by the automated process normally get equally high rankings as the beloved masterpieces created by the player. Both controlling the studio and making the films can undoubtedly be satisfying and time-consuming. However, since these two parts of the game are not very well connected to each other they feel a bit like parallel products coming from the same package. The players who primarily enjoy the creation of their own animations probably soon move to 'sandbox' mode where the player can leave other tasks to one side and fully concentrate on the moviemaking experience.

There are a few facts that highlight the centrality of the moviemaking editor in understanding *The Movies*. First of all, there was a dedicated team working on the moviemaking toolset throughout the game development process.⁷ Secondly, *The Movies Online*, which will be discussed shortly, is primarily a site for player-produced films. Players may share opinions or hints in the forums, but the community site, run by Lionhead, is foremost an exhibition venue for short films created with the game. Indeed, Activision canned the console versions of the game only a couple of months after the launch of the PC version. Therefore the focus of the developer is solely on the networked PC environment that easily lends itself to the circulation of digital movie files. Finally, *The Movies: Stunts and Effects* expansion pack launched in March 2006 focuses primarily on enhancing the moviemaking dimension by introducing features like more flexible camera control and advanced visual effects.

As mentioned earlier, the practice of making films with the help of commercial game engines is nowadays often called *machinima*. The term itself refers to the marriage of media (filmmaking, animation and game technology) and in simple terms it can be defined as 'animated filmmaking within a real-time virtual 3D environment' (Marino, 2004: 1). Many computer games and third party tools allow players to capture and record the events of the fictional gameworld. These recordings can be used, for example, to introduce the skills of particular players or guilds, to store focal events of the gameworld, or to educate other players to work out some particularly difficult scenes in the game. Further, computer games – or more precisely game engines – are increasingly utilized in creating individual films that are not in any clear fashion derivative of the games.

The term 'game engine' refers to the core portions of the software code that, amongst other things, controls the physics of the gameworld and the visual representation of the game. As the player moves in the gameworld, the picture on the screen is constantly drawn and re-drawn. Executed in real-time and in high frame-rates, this rendering immerses the player into a three-dimensional space (Lowood, 2006a). As mentioned, this effect can be utilized, not only to build seamless gameworlds, but also to create experiences of a cinematic nature. The precursors of *machinima* can be found in the 1980s *demoscene* – a computer subculture that created mainly non-interactive multimedia presentations. However, it took until the breakthrough of the 3D engines in the mid-1990s for *machinima* to really take off. It was especially the recordings made with the early first person shooter games like *Doom* (1993) and *Quake* (1996) that constituted the foundations for this new expressive medium (Lowood, 2005).

Utilized for filmmaking, 3D game engines differ significantly from tools used for 'traditional' 3D animation. In traditional animation, every object and every shot has to be perfected individually and rendered into a movie before the filmmaker can see the result. In the case of *machinima* the director is more like a puppeteer who pulls invisible strings with simple keyboard controls and mouse clicks. The game engine then works out

how to show the actions on the screen (Kelland et al., 2005: 10–21). At its simplest, *machinima* can come very close to shooting a live-action movie. It therefore basically makes the animation process much faster. However, until recently the making of *machinima* has normally required advanced skills in coding and relatively substantial amounts of time. For example, the multi-player choreographies and crowd scenes shot in real time in massively multi-player online games (MMOGs) do not necessarily require additional programming but can still demand weeks of preparation and organization (Thomas, 2005).

Machinima is, however, much more than a real-time animation technique. It is about the skilled and subversive exploits of gaming, a playful practice that builds on existing game technologies and cultures. *Machinima* highlights the nature of digital games as software: in the hands of skilled hobbyists games become tools, a means of production (Jones, 2006: 269–70). In this respect it can be argued that the investment in the moviemaking dimension of *The Movies* results in a transition that transforms the game (the simulation) into merely a by-product that attunes the players to a productive mode. I may be over-emphasizing this somewhat, but the shift from a game to a moviemaking toolbox clearly indicates changes in the way ‘playing’ is situated and should be acknowledged in connection with *The Movies*. Another issue that questions the ‘place’ of playing is the online extension of the game that can be argued to take *The Movies* beyond a single-player game. I will now examine this online dimension of the game.

In the case of *The Movies*, converting the finalized movies into the most common video formats and exporting the files to the internet is made very simple. As mentioned earlier, Lionhead runs a community website *The Movies Online*⁸ where players are encouraged to publish their pieces. On the website members are also asked to rate, review and discuss the movies other players have uploaded to the site. Thus, the website adds a sort of multi-player dimension to *The Movies* by attaching real-life reviewers and critics to the game. The community is used as a ‘social patch’ to supplement the inadequate feedback the software has to offer to moviemakers. A personal webpage is created for every registered member and within the limits of their web-space players can upload any movies created with the game to their studio webpage. The structure of the studio pages is pre-formatted so that even players with no knowledge of updating a webpage can create an instant site for their works. The downside to this is that players have very limited control over the appearance of their sites and all the studio pages end up looking pretty much the same. In this respect *The Movies Online* can be compared to such popular networking sites as *MySpace* that offer a free and simple way to build a web presence for individuals and their projects. This comparison also reminds us of the commercial reasoning behind the online site. It is solely the user-provided content that draws other people to *MySpace* and enables service providers to create significant advertising revenues (Scharmen, 2006). Although *The Movies Online* does not rely on an advertisement-based financial structure, the player-created content is similarly used to draw traffic to the site. As we will see, this publicity can then be used to advertise the game or, for example, to attract sponsors for the game-related events and campaigns.

Registering on *The Movies Online* site has concrete benefits for players. By uploading movies to the website, players can earn virtual credits. With these credits the player can buy new props, sets and costumes that are not available in the basic set. The greatest benefit seems to be, however, the opportunity to get in contact with other people with

similar and complementary interests. On the website forum players do not only promote their films but also search for other people to team up with. One of the most common forms of co-operation is to ask for help in voice-acting. There are several threads where people either request volunteers for particular roles or offer themselves for voice-overs. Further, a director can place an order for a customized overlay or backdrop or make a request for an experienced movie poster designer. Directors also form guilds and passionately discuss the details of filmmaking and editing. Others devote themselves to the art of reviewing and become critics. The importance of critics is also highlighted by the developer since the ratings of other players are utilized to determine which players can earn extra credits. Players who specialize in reviewing other people's movies also join forces and form clubs like MoMc (Movement for Organized Movie Critique).⁹ This critics guild has more than 200 members who actively discuss the issues that should be taken into account when reviewing *The Movies* productions. Over periods of months, players form long-lasting relationships and these friendships make players come back to the game.

But still, what exactly are the benefits that the publisher and the developer expect from this online dimension of the game? In June 2006, eight months after the launch of *The Movies*, Lionhead announced that almost 90,000 movies had been uploaded to the site.¹⁰ The visual style of these movies is clearly recognizable among the game films and other clips available at video sharing websites or circulating between individual internet users. At the same time, these short films nicely introduce and advertise the possibilities of the moviemaking tool. We can also expect some more or less intentional peer-to-peer marketing to happen since the files can be easily converted to the most common video formats and therefore easily shown to other people or exchanged via email. These features not only increase awareness among potential customers but they can also affect the very critical shelf-life of the product.

When compared to computer game modifications – another example of player creativity – *machinima* films have a potentially wider appeal since their audience is not limited to people who play games. The first *machinima* films were delivered as demo files and, as with game modifications, they had to be played in-game. Today the movies are available to every internet user in downloadable and streamed formats. This development works to widen the appeal and to expand the potential audience for *machinima* movies beyond the gaming community (Lowood, 2006b: 380). Thus, *The Movies* appears to both broaden the number of hobbyist-directors and participate in a process whereby large audiences are brought into contact with player-made movies.

The opportunity to produce short films of one's own does not only lengthen the shelf-life of the game but also incurs extra work and expense. Traditionally, the work of the game software developer is for the most part concluded when the title is published. This has recently changed, particularly in the case of MMOGs that require ongoing community support and content development after purchase (Kerr, 2006: 62). Although *The Movies* is basically a single-player game, we can see that it follows a similar pattern. Much of the work only begins after the launch of the game and both the website and the expansion pack have been developed in close contact with active players.

So far we can see that *The Movies* builds on transformative play on various levels. Re-purposing computer game engines to make movies was originally a very radical transformation. Traditionally, this appropriation of game content has required advanced coding skills, ability to co-operate with other people and significant amounts of time. The role

The Movies plays in this transformation is to popularize *machinima* by offering an effective and easy-to-use toolset for the communities of players. By transforming movie-making into game mechanics (a central motif of the game), *The Movies*, at the same time, forces us to ask whether the movies made with the game still qualify as transformative play. Obviously the content of the players' films cannot be anticipated. Furthermore, players can import customized costumes and retextured props for their animations. However, the subversive dimension of these actions seems to be very limited. Instead, moviemaking becomes part of the intended use of the software.

One might be tempted to argue that this attempt to capitalize on transformative play is about incorporation – about corporate power 'squeezing' the fruits of game culture into its reserves. A radically different but still perfectly reasonable interpretation could argue that actually *The Movies* is a logical phase in the continuum of computer games. PC game developers routinely release their development tools and editors for players to play with and therefore a current PC game is actually as much a set of tools as a finished design (Lowood, 2005: 15). Therefore the relation of industry to productive players has to be studied further before making any judgements. In order to avoid crude over-simplifications and to tease out further complexities I will now examine what kind of setting *The Movies* ultimately offers for amateur productivity.

Making Culture in the Age of Commodified Play

Today, commodity form exercises a profound influence over different types of culture. As demonstrated earlier, games are no exception: more than ever before games exist as commodities and services that are industrially designed and manufactured, extensively marketed, and bought and sold in massive numbers. Kline et al. describe digital games as the ideal commodity for post-Fordism. They propose that in production, the youthful and precarious workforce of the game industry typifies the current forms of enterprise and labour. In consumption, digital games exemplify post-Fordism's tendency to fill people's leisure time and domestic space with customized and experiential commodities (2003: 75). Game cultures continually appropriate and build on the commodities developed and sold by the game industry. As we have seen, player investment in and with the game can also become an object of commodification. At the same time, however, we have to agree with the critics who point out that owning the media does not equal controlling the hearts and minds of consumers. Yet, recognizing the emancipatory and subversive potentials embedded in game cultures should not deflect us from examining the specific properties that games acquire as a commodity.

In comparison to various other game community outputs (playing styles, social networks, websites, forum postings) the short films produced with *The Movies* form a particularly easily consumable commodity. However, building a business on player creations like this still requires both new kinds of control mechanisms and fresh ways of rewarding the players. The variety of these practices will be illustrated through two brief examples. First, we will look at one movie in particular, Alex Chan's *The French Democracy*, and then we will examine *The Chrysler in The Movies Virtual Film Competition*.

Only a few weeks after the launch of the game, messages about a 13-minute movie about the French riots started to circulate among gamer websites. In a matter of weeks *The French Democracy* attracted substantial international media attention and was widely

featured in the global media, including the *Washington Post*, *Business Week* and MTV. The film provides a strong critique of the racial tensions leading to the riots in the suburbs of Paris. It follows three young immigrants and the racial discrimination and indignities they are forced to go through on a regular basis. Although the animation characters may seem lifeless and stiff, and the dialogue could be improved, the movie succeeds in telling a touching story and producing an alternative and personal view of the riots. Among *machinima* enthusiasts *The French Democracy* and its success have been considered to represent a crucial moment in the history of the art form. If earlier *machinima* mostly consisted of game-related inside jokes and fan movies, *The French Democracy* evidently opens up new perspectives. *The French Democracy* also poses an important question concerning research agendas. The importance of understanding the interconnections between consumption and citizenship have been highlighted in recent theoretical discussions. The productive actions of consumers (in our case players) can be argued to generate and sustain new spaces of public connection. At the same time, 'citizenship' is dispersed across a variety of practices and sites of action (Couldry, 2004). A *machinima* film with a serious societal message suggests that the study of productive player actions could clearly benefit from an approach that takes seriously the interconnections between 'player' and 'citizen'.

The international media attention did not go unnoticed at Lionhead and a few weeks later the company issued a press release about the film. The press release included a citation from Molyneux saying:

With *The Movies* we wanted to make a game that allows anyone to easily express themselves by making a short film and posting them online to share with the world. Alex's film, which is absolutely terrific, really demonstrates the potential power and impact that these films can have.¹¹

There is no reason to question the sincerity of this statement. Yet there are several ways to read it since one of things *The French Democracy* demonstrates is the power of the player-made films as a marketing asset. In this sense, the press release also reminds us of the fact that players are allowed to make and circulate their movies only as long as they do not run contrary to corporate needs.

The French Democracy undoubtedly demonstrates the empowering potential of the easy-to-use moviemaking tools. Yet Chan, as any other hobbyist auteur who uploads her movies to the community website, has granted Lionhead 'a non-exclusive licence to use your movie without charge or payment'. This is one of the things the player agrees to when accepting the Terms of Use of *The Movies Online*. In the case of *The Movies*, the production and distribution of player-made films is regulated with a combination of a game-specific End User Licence Agreement (EULA) and a Terms of Use (TOC) document introduced at the online site. EULA is a contract between the makers of the game and the player and it is normally presented to the player in the beginning of the installation procedure. Mostly the installation of the game software is conditional upon the user accepting the agreement. The purpose of EULA is to define the legitimate use of software. Thus, players do not actually own the copy of software, they can only purchase limited rights to use it. In the case of *The Movies*, the licence agreement states that the assets/content supplied with the game belong to Activision and 'commercial use of these assets/content or use for any form of financial gain is strictly prohibited'. Therefore players may own their movies as 'work' but the use of these works is strictly controlled.

The Terms of *The Movies Online* go further in restricting the use of the movies. The TOC includes content restrictions that prohibit the use of 'content which is racist, pornographic, defamatory or otherwise objectionable'. Further, the TOC makes players warrant that their movies do not 'incorporate any content owned by a third party' or 'violate or infringe upon any third party's intellectual property rights'. As already mentioned, Lionhead also reserves its right to use every single movie uploaded to their site without charge or payment. Movies can be used for 'promotional and marketing activities connected with the website, the game and possibly other products developed by Lionhead/Activision'. If players find these regulations too harsh they can choose to post their works to other sites like *machinima.com* or *YouTube*. In this case, however, they lose the benefits of the community focused particularly on *The Movies*. One somewhat understandable reason for the tight content regulations are the potential legal threats. A *machinima* maker who used intellectual property belonging to a third party, and thereby committed copyright or trademark violations, is likely to be contacted by the IP owner's lawyers and 'the cinema owner', as it were, may also get its share of bad publicity. It is obvious that Lionhead or Activision cannot control every movie designed with the game, but what they can do is keep the official site pristine.¹²

From a cultural perspective, EULAs and TOCs can be seen as a symptom of notable changes in the media environment. Currently, the value of cultural goods rests increasingly on the regime of intellectual property rights that allows cultural industries such as the game industry to exploit the value of their intangible assets (Herman et al., 2006). As discussed earlier, at the same time affordable personal computers and relatively easy-to-use digital software combined with access to the internet have allowed players to become agents of cultural production. Unsurprisingly, game publishers are eager to reserve the rights associated with the content that players generate. In this situation, licence documents serve as a powerful instrument in controlling the intellectual property rights. In the case of MMOGs, player-created data is often treated as an integral part of the corporately owned game (Herman et al., 2006: 195). The critics of restrictive licence agreements have pointed out that the ideas of copyright and intellectual property rely on a particular notion of media production. These models are based on the idea of finalized and fixed texts: when launched and sold the software is supposed to be 'complete' and therefore the property of the publisher (Humphreys, 2005: 43; Herman et al., 2006: 195). Thus, *The Movies* as a game-like tool that has player-created stand-alone outcomes fundamentally questions the current framework controlling the ownership of cultural goods. However, the control and management exercised by the game industry is of course not entirely based on restraints and prohibitions. Therefore I will now consider an example where players are wilfully allowed to 'play' with intellectual property belonging to a third party.

The Chrysler in The Movies Virtual Film Competition is the most spectacular contest organized so far for the hobbyist directors creating their films with *The Movies* editor. From its very beginning, the *Chrysler* competition brought together the realms of film and games in a very interesting fashion. The competition was launched during the 2006 Sundance Film Festival – the largest festival for independent films in the USA. The award ceremony where the grand prize – a real Chrysler Crossfire Coupé – was delivered took place at the most well-known game industry trade show, Electronic Entertainment Expo (E3), in Los Angeles.

The rules of participation are very simple. First of all, entries must be created with *The Movies* game, set in the present day, and they are recommended to be two to three minutes in length. Secondly, and importantly, entries must use a minimum of one Chrysler vehicle. The models are provided by the sponsor and they can be downloaded from the contest website. What we witness here is, in one sense, an emergence of consumer-made product placement. Consumers are designing films for other consumers to consume and every film has a digital replica of the sponsor's product included. The marketing department must be clapping their hands while players toil away on their projects; this may not, after all, be so surprising from an industry frequently introducing new revenue models. Yet the role of Chrysler makes the case very interesting since the rules of the competition state that 'all Entries uploaded to the Web Site become the sole and exclusive property of Sponsor without reservation of any kind'. Thus, the car manufacturer is free to use players' films for advertising or any other purpose.

In connection with the competition Jeff Bell, the vice-president of Chrysler, announced:

Chrysler is a brand built on inspiration and innovation. We are excited to launch this new competition that will showcase the great lineup of Chrysler vehicles in a fun and engaging way, while providing an opportunity for players to show their own personal inspirations.¹³

Again, as in the case of *The French Democracy*, the significance of player-creativity is highlighted. This time, however, there is no uncertainty as regards the main aim of the arrangement. By associating itself with the youthful and exuberant realm of digital games Chrysler obviously expects some of the coolness to stick to its brand. Moreover, this is not the first time the Chrysler brand has sought to benefit from its connection to digital games: the Chrysler Group's Jeep played a part in Tony Hawk's *Pro Skater 3* (2001). This example demonstrates how the participation of players generates surplus value that can be sold onwards. The political economy of the media recognizes this practice as *audience commodity*: the media manufactures audiences and then sells them to advertisers (Smythe, 1977). Once again, the operations of the game industry prove to be a messy combination of fresh player-involving strategies and old-fashioned media industry calculation. The rise of user-created videos and free video-hosting services has posed interesting questions concerning the future of television as we know it. The sharing of short video files contributes to the emergence of new personalized watching habits and importantly, the user-created videos are normally not accompanied by any advertising at all. As the example of the Chrysler competition shows, this may not be the case in the future.

Although *The Chrysler in The Movies* may be the most high-profile competition, it is definitely not the only contest organized for the players of *The Movies*. The competitions organized by Lionhead can be found on a dedicated page at *The Movies Online*.¹⁴ Since the players are also active in organizing competitions of their own, it can be argued that contests have an important role in constructing the online dimension of the game. The community structure – where a squad of directors compete with each other to get reviewers interested in their movies – lends itself well to more formal competitions. Thus, it can be argued that some game-like qualities are intentionally imported to the practices of fan producers. As I have suggested earlier, the online dimension significantly changes the emphasis of player activities: the player-made animations derive their meaning only in negotiation with other game enthusiasts. This development indicates that at least for

some players the whole game actually ends up being relocated and the primary 'game board' moves to the internet fora.

As already mentioned, one should avoid too antagonistic an understanding of the relationship between players and the game industry. The perceptions of the player vary enormously already in the current game design literature, not to mention the actual industry practices (Sotamaa, 2007). Already in the case of one single game – *The Movies* – player motivations and corporate interests vary. On the one hand, players are frequently consulted in developing the online site and their needs and wishes have been taken into account in designing the expansion pack. On the other, the management of player-created intellectual property and sponsor deals reflect a more instrumental and non-progressive attitude towards gamers. Hence, the relationship should be understood as a continuum where the self-expression of players is both encouraged, supported, directed and limited in varying ways.

Conclusions

In the age of commodified play, players face trade-offs all the time. In order to access the digital playgrounds or experiment with new tools, players often have to give up some rights concerning the products of their playing hours. Since player investment is becoming increasingly central to the success and longevity of many PC games, there is an obvious need for new models based on the ideas of joint- and multiple-ownership. At the same time, there is a need for theoretical models capable of tolerating and explaining the complex relations that can possess empowering and exploitative qualities simultaneously. The processes involved in generating the room for play are not entirely about excessive corporate power dominating powerless players. The spheres of culture and commerce are intertwined and, if anything, the practices are, at the same time, voluntarily channelled and industrially orchestrated (see Humphreys, 2005: 47–49). Some of the demands imposed in EULAs, TOCs and competition rules are notably dubious, but Lionhead's reliance on player-productivity simultaneously reveals that players can hold particular kinds of power as well. While this power is restricted and different from that of the developers, the enthusiastic participation of players has the potential for either completing or ruining the plans of the corporate actors.

The Movies highlights the nature of computer games as software. As much as it is a game, it is a toolset for making animations. From the perspective of *machinima* it is not news that computer games can be used as a set of design tools. By implementing the editor as part of the game *The Movies*, however, significantly lowers the threshold of using a computer game for moviemaking. At the same time it can be argued that by popularizing the making of *machinima*, *The Movies* reduces the transformative values associated with game movies. *The Movies* also significantly participates in blurring the sacred 'magic circle'. When the software can be used to design outputs that work independently outside the game, playing has clear real-world consequences. In addition, as players develop and review animations and participate in competitions, video-hosting sites and other web fora also come to serve as sites of play. Thus, games like *The Movies* that enable players to focus solely on particular dimensions or parts of the game have a potential to generate very different player interpretations concerning the limits, situatedness and meanings of the game.

A pessimistic interpretation of the game industry would suggest that the increasing development costs, consolidation and the dependency on the rapid development of technology have made the current corporate players very hesitant to innovate and take risks. The firm control over player productivity – visible in the case of *The Movies* – can be seen as a consequence of this tendency. Nevertheless, this does not need to be the case. For example, Linden Lab's *Second Life* (2003) has taken a pioneering step by affirming players' intellectual property rights in their creations. We can only imagine what could have happened if Lionhead and Activision had done something similar in the case of *The Movies*. Therefore, I suggest that cases like *The Movies* require us to expand the study of rules to the 'out-game rules' defined by the corporate players. These rules will have a significant influence on the future of player productivity.

Notes

- 1 In developing his 'classic game model' Juul makes a similar remark. He suggests that games can be understood both as objects consisting of rules and as activities that players perform (Juul, 2005: 43–45).
- 2 For a discussion regarding the challenges of this development to media studies see Croteau (2006).
- 3 By cultural industries I refer to the institutions and actors that produce, distribute and circulate meanings via symbolic forms (Hesmondhalgh, 2002; in relation to games see Kerr, 2006: 44–47).
- 4 At the time of writing a new generation of consoles had just been launched. Microsoft's Xbox 360 (2005) has been globally available for some time now. Both Nintendo's Wii (2006) and Sony's Playstation 3 (2006/2007) have also been introduced to the home market in the USA, Europe and Japan. At the same time, even though the number of new designs for earlier generation consoles (Microsoft Xbox, Nintendo GameCube and Sony Playstation 2) is decreasing, millions of people still enthusiastically play games on these and earlier platforms.
- 5 The recent scholarly contribution to the issue of game genres emphasizes the need for a shift towards a system where the focus is not so much on the visual and narrative terminology but is instead based on more game-specific classification of the modes of interaction (Apperley, 2006).
- 6 URL (consulted 15 June 2007): <http://www.lionhead.com/news/mgsacquirelh.html>
- 7 Interview with Stephen Hood, one of the designers of *The Movies*. URL (consulted 15 June 2007): <http://www.machinima.com/article.php?id=442>
- 8 URL (consulted 15 June 2007): <http://movies.lionhead.com/>
- 9 URL (consulted 15 June 2007): <http://www.momc.info/forum/>
- 10 URL (consulted 15 June 2007): http://www.lionhead.com/se/se_pressrelease.html
- 11 URL (consulted 15 June 2007): <http://www.lionhead.com/news/tminternational.html>
- 12 There is no preventative censorship at *The Movies Online*. However, occasional movies get cancelled every now and then.
- 13 URL (consulted 15 June 2007): http://pc.gamezone.com/news/01_16_06_08_08PM.htm
- 14 URL (consulted 15 June 2007): <http://movies.lionhead.com/competition.html>

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