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Introduction: Co-creating matters

Gamers do not just play videogames; they also make them. The boundaries between playing and producing and consuming are blurring. By collaborating and cooperating with each other and with professional developers, gamers design, produce, circulate and market compelling videogames. I call this process co-creative.

Over the past few years we have seen the rise of user-generated content and user-led innovation as significant cultural and economic phenomenon (Benkler 2006: 60; Bruns 2008; OECD 2007; Shirky 2008; Burgess and Green 2009a; Hartley 2009; Jenkins 2009). In December 2006, *Time Magazine* celebrated 'You' as the person of the year, saluting the millions of people who use and contribute to social networking platforms such as YouTube, MySpace and Wikipedia. These media consumers are now sometimes also media producers who make and circulate media content and experiences. Co-creativity occurs when consumers contribute a non-trivial component of the design, development, production, marketing and distribution of a new or existing product. As Prahalad and Ramaswamy (2004) propose in *The Future of Competition*, value is increasingly co-created by both the firm and the customer (see also Foster 2007; Grabher et al. 2008; NESTA 2008). Henry Jenkins and Joshua Green (2009: 213) write:

By the early twenty-first century, fans have been redefined as the drivers of wealth production within the new digital economy: their engagement and participation is actively being pursued, if still imperfectly understood, by media companies interested in adopting Web 2.0 strategies of user-generated content, social networks, and 'harnessing collective intelligence'.

Recognizing these potentially significant shifts in the conditions of cultural production, we now need to think carefully about this phenomenon. How should we understand these emerging co-creative behaviours and practices? How do these co-creative relations play out at the grass-roots level of media

industry workplaces? What are the implications of these changes for the jobs and identities of creative professionals? In what sense can we say that co-creativity matters? This book is about how consumers and media professionals in the context of the videogames industry grapple with the challenges and opportunities of co-creative media. These participants' diverse understandings, motivations and incentives collectively contribute to making co-creativity. The pressing challenge is to better understand the conditions in which these collaborative and creative energies can be coordinated for mutual benefit.

This book draws from just over a decade of ethnographic participatory-observation research, commencing in 1997, undertaken with videogames development companies in Australia and the United States. I draw on, for example, interviews undertaken in 2009 with staff at leading US-based games company Maxis, the developer of *The Sims* series and *Spore*. I also draw on extensive ethnographic research undertaken from 1997 to 2005 with Brisbane, Australia-based Auran games. This book describes and analyses the co-creative relationships between professional developers and the networks of gamers that provide developers with extensive play-testing, feedback, creative design input, provision of digital art content and marketing support. It describes the key actors (programmers, designers, producers, online community managers, marketing managers, gamers, technologies and business people) who contribute to making this emergent culture and who are, in turn, shaped by co-creativity. Games scholar T. L. Taylor (2006b: 159–60; also see 2006a) argues that players are co-creative 'productive agents' in the creation of videogames and asserts that we need 'more progressive models' for understanding and integrating players' creative contribution to the making of these products and cultures (also see Postigo 2003, 2007; Humphreys 2005a, b). Written from a front-line ethnographic perspective, this book provides behind-the-scenes details of how game developers grapple with the challenges of making co-creative culture to propose such a model.

From June 2000 through to 2005 my research relationship with Auran shifted when I accepted employment as the company's online community relations manager. This role largely involved managing Auran's relations with an on online rail-fan community that formed around the game development project, *Trainz* (www.auran.com): a train and railroad simulation released in 2001. From 2001 through to 2011, Auran released some 14 different product iterations for the *Trainz* simulator series and grew a global online community to well over 200,000 members. Over 1,000,000 *Trainz* units sold to gamers in Australia, United States and throughout Europe. Auran and the *Trainz* project provides an ethnographic case study for this book.

Throughout 2007, I also undertook ethnographic research with Auran, following the final stages of the development and launch of its competitive

player versus player (PvP) massively multiplayer online game (MMOG) *Fury*, which was released in October 2007 and ultimately commercially failed. I worked closely for extended periods throughout 2007 with members of Auran's online community relations team, *Fury*'s developers, and Auran senior management. I also participated in pre-release play-testing of *Fury*, joining in extensive play and feedback sessions with *Fury* gamers, as well as interviewing gamers participating in this co-creative relationship with Auran.

Drawing from this ethnographic participatory research of daily work practices at Auran that I have recorded in field work notes and journals, and from extensive semi-structured interviews undertaken with Auran staff (well over 30 interviews), Maxis staff and members of the gamer fan communities forming around the game development projects, I describe the challenges of incorporating these co-creative relationships into the very heart of the development process and the impacts these shifts have on conventional firm structures and cultures, including the identities and roles of media professionals and creatively engaged citizen-consumers.

Co-creative cultural production is close to Joseph Schumpeter's (1950) account of the restless and unsettling gales of creative destruction that drive capitalist innovation. In the course of this book I provide accounts of how these emerging relationships also contribute to business failures and uncertainty about the jobs of creative professionals. These co-creative relationships unsettle existing business models, modes of project organization, legal frameworks and regulatory regimes. This is not a study then of the smoothly hegemonic operations of big media enterprise as it finds yet another source of profitable surplus value. In a Schumpeterian sense these changes emerge from within market capitalism to provide the seeds for often unanticipated, uncertain and difficult to govern and manage instabilities and innovations.

Co-creativity is not only a bottom-up and peer-to-peer dynamic among amateurs. Co-creativity requires the craft skills and knowledge and commitment of professionals and experts. My understanding of co-creativity focuses on the connections and relationships among amateurs and professionals. This book is oriented by the ethnographic impulse to describe the lived experiences of creative industries professionals and citizen-consumers as they explore together the opportunities and challenges of this emerging co-creative culture. As Paul Rabinow (1996: 17) proposes in his ethnographic study of Cetus Corporation, a biotech company: 'The anthropologically pertinent point is the fashioning of the particularity of practices'. To meet this goal I include extensive interview extracts and description of daily work practices to foreground the participants' (both professional and amateur) diverse understandings and experiences of co-creative practices. As we shall see, the professional videogames development teams are often far from united in their understanding of and support for this co-creative production process.

Producers, designers, programmers, artists, marketing and community relations managers, and CEOs, have very different understandings of these co-creative relationships. But it is from these uneven practices that co-creative culture is made. There are irresolvable tensions and conflicts at the very heart of co-creativity.

The first three chapters of this book are heavily ethnographic descriptive with the aim to illuminate the practices of making co-creative culture. But ethnographic research is also about theory building. The point and value of the detailed case-study descriptions is not just ethnographic verisimilitude but also to inform an analytic framework and model that Jason Potts (Banks and Potts 2010) and I call *multiple games* in the context of *social network markets* and that I develop over the final few chapters. This model aims to provide an analytic foundation to better understand co-creativity. These two ambitions of ethnographic description and model building align uneasily. The participants' accounts do not always seamlessly integrate with our model building ambitions.

Multiple games in the context of social network markets, the idea and proposition at the heart of this book, models co-creative culture as co-evolving markets and non-markets; this dynamic and emergent process is partly about the emergence of new, unstable and disruptive market relations. Social network markets draw attention to a demand-driven dynamic in which the agency and *choices* of creative citizen-consumers and their social networks, together with professional expertise and skills, are fundamental. This is a model of *distributed learning* over a complex and uncertain environment that changes as and because agents explore it. It is a social and emergent learning process because it is a discovery process that builds upon itself. The agents, both professional and amateur, are engaged in learning processes that are heavily networked and emergent. These agents' choices are influenced by the choices of others. But they are making and exercising choices in contexts of quite profound uncertainty about the pay-offs and incentives at stake in these co-creative transactions. This model, however, is not about reducing cultural practices to economic or commercial imperatives as these choice contexts are often simultaneously about both commercial and non-commercial values or intrinsic *and* extrinsic incentives. A multiple game, we propose, is the basic analytic unit when focused on social learning and emergent behaviour in contexts of co-creativity. The basic idea is that agents navigating a world of behaviours in overlapping incommensurable contexts (both commercial and non-commercial) will find negotiated rules and norms for actions, and these rules and norms will mostly be sourced from and negotiated with the social environment itself. This is adaptive and experimental play.

What do these multiple games and social network markets look like? My thinking about this mix of commercial and non-commercial motivations and

incentives, professional work and expertise coordinating with consumer hobbyist passion and dedication, that seemed to be at the very heart of co-creativity coalesced for me in a particular moment of my ethnographic research and employment with Auran. I glimpsed the potential of co-creativity for changing how we generate knowledge and learn. At the same time questions about the terms and conditions in which the value generated through these activities is shared and distributed troubled me. In July 2002 some six months after *Trainz*'s commercial release I attended the National Model Railroad Association (NMRA) convention held in Fort Lauderdale, Florida. I was attending this convention with Auran colleagues to promote the game. In the lead up to this convention *Trainz* fans were eagerly awaiting the release of an update that would support steam locomotives. This was a much-requested feature that Auran's developers had not completed in time for the release. However, an ad hoc group of *Trainz* content creators had figured out through adaptive trial-and-error experimentation how to include steam locomotive content in the game. This distributed user-led innovation effort looked like it might beat Auran's professionals to introducing steam. Although I was also aware that many of the Auran developers were assisting these amateur developers with information and guidance about how best to advance this steam project. I provide a more detailed account of this steam locomotive project in Chapter 3.¹ But at this introductory stage in this book an account of this convention event where I encountered one of the early outcomes of this steam project usefully brings together the various threads of co-creativity that are at the core of our idea of multiple games and social network markets.

Rail-fan enthusiasts and associated businesses and clubs from all over the world attended the convention. Members of the online *Trainz* fan community also joined us. We had arranged for Badtrash to fly to Fort Lauderdale from his home in Georgia so that he could assist by both demonstrating and selling *Trainz*. Mutey, Bitstorm and Amethyst had made a four-hour-plus drive late at night, to arrive at the hotel in the early hours of the morning, bringing their PCs and monitors to help out by demoing *Trainz* to the model rail hobbyists. The volunteer fan team stood for hours in front of PCs, demoing *Trainz*'s features and fielding questions. They actively pursued sales, encouraging reluctant or wavering potential customers with comments like: 'Look, this game is absolutely fantastic. I spend hours every week playing it. I just cannot get enough of it. And I'm not even paid to be here.' They would then demonstrate one of their favourite *Trainz* features, showing how easy it is to lay track or create a mountain range and put in a tunnel. The demonstrations often ended with Badtrash or Mutey making the sale.

This sense of co-creativity reached something of a climax on the final day of the show when another member of the *Trainz* fan community, Gumby,

arrived to help out. Gumby was a quite well-known and talented member of the content creation community. Together with a small team of creators, he was working on a series of locomotive models whose release through their website, Digital Roundhouse (www.digitalroundhouse.com), was eagerly anticipated by many in the growing *Trainz* online community. Shortly after arriving at the show and introducing himself, Gumby handed me a CD, prompting: 'Take a look, you've got to load this, I think you'll be impressed.' I handed the CD to Bitstorm who loaded it with the comment, 'Oh yeah, I saw that this baby had gone up on Download Station.' 'There she is,' announced Badtrash, and I heard a few wows and noises of appreciation from the rail fans clustered around the monitors. One elderly man I had been discussing the features and merits of *Trainz* with (we had worked out that his PC really wouldn't support *Trainz*) tapped me on the shoulder, pointed at the screen and said: 'I thought you said *Trainz* didn't have steam, that P10 is a beautiful beast, if it has steam then I want a copy.' After paying the \$40 and writing down our recommendation for upgrading his PC hardware, the man stood back for a half-hour or so with a growing crowd of appreciative onlookers glued to the image of the P10 steamer chugging around a layout up on the screen.

I recall an Auran colleague whispering as he passed by, completing another sale: 'Wish we had steam from the start of the show, would probably have got us a good few more sales.' He requested that we turn up the speakers' volume, so the steam sound effects would grab attention and maybe sales. This mixing of technologies, fan investment, capital investment and commerce, DIY practices and skills and histories with professional developer skill and expertise blurs the boundaries among agents and enterprises. The P10 entangles the commercial and the non-commercial, the proprietary and the non-proprietary in an uneasy alliance.

Multiple games are what each of us plays every day when we need to make choices to act in the overlap of sometimes complex, conflicting and uncertain multiple environments. The value generated by and thorough co-creativity emerges from the frictions and tensions among these incommensurable and often contending domains. Co-creativity is not a situation in which we must or should decide on privileging one over the other: the commercial over the non-commercial or vice versa. Instead, we are experimenting and adaptively learning how to harness these practices for mutual benefit. By proposing this, however, I am not suggesting that discovering what constitutes mutual benefit and how best to pursue that is straightforward. As we will see throughout this book – it is difficult and perplexing and potentially rewarding.

Chapter 1, 'Situating co-creativity', identifies and describes the key issues, topics and challenges of co-creative cultural production by engaging with the work of Henry Jenkins (2006), Yochai Benkler (2006) and Axel Bruns (2008),

among others. I also introduce co-creativity in the context of videogames by discussing games such as *Spore* and *LittleBigPlanet*.

This chapter then draws on the ethnographic research I have undertaken with Auran games (Brisbane, Australia) and semi-structured interviews with staff at Maxis (San Francisco, United States) to contextualize my argument about the significance and characteristics of co-creativity. I draw on interviews with developers and managers at both companies to identify the key issues and challenges confronting media professionals as they grapple with co-creativity. This chapter describes how the developers and managers endeavour to articulate what is at stake in these co-creative relationships.

Throughout this ethnographic research the technologies that contribute to the making of these co-creative relations became a pressing issue. What is the status of game engines and software editing tools in the making of co-creativity? Most recent studies of participatory culture and user-generated content, while acknowledging the significance of Information Communication Technologies (ICTs), then often black box the role of technologies in shaping these relationships. Chapter 2, 'Co-creative technologies' explores this question of technology by examining Auran's efforts from 1998 through to 2001 to build an open-architecture game engine. Drawing on interviews with Auran's programmers, designers, producers and graphic artists, this chapter examines how the game engine reconfigured relations within the Auran development team. I use the actor-network theory (ANT) of Bruno Latour, John Law and Annemarie Mol to argue that the game engine is a complex object that in its very multiplicity coordinates different competing and conflicting agendas. The different versions of Auran's game engine, although often incommensurable and incoherent, do hang together. Incommensurabilities are not necessarily obstacles to the successful performance of a game engine technology development project. Game engines and editing tools are important in the making of co-creative culture. While emphasizing the role of both humans and non-humans in the making of networks such as co-creativity, ANT however loses analytic traction when we try to understand the nature of these dynamic relationships. I turn to the evolutionary theory approach of W. Brian Arthur (2009) to understand how *technological evolution* shapes co-creativity.

Chapter 3, 'Co-creating *Trainz*', provides a descriptive case study of how Auran increasingly involved train and rail fans in the process of designing and making *Trainz*. This chapter covers the production and commercial release of *Trainz* from June 2000 to 2004. Over this period Auran came to increasingly rely on the *Trainz* fans' content creation. Using editing tools provided with the game, users make their own 3D rail world layouts and import 3D models of locomotives, and then share them with other users through the Auran website. The value generated through these co-creative activities contributed directly

to *Trainz*'s commercial success. Fan creators were effectively embedded throughout the design, development of *Trainz*. I question, however, the tendency to frame these relationships through oppositions between the commercial and the non-commercial. I argue that such stark oppositions are not helpful in understanding the complexities and opportunities that shape this emerging landscape.

Chapter 4 'Co-creative labour?' (with Sal Humphreys) considers games developers' reliance on the value generated by train and rail fans as a form of user labour. It explores work by Tiziana Terranova, Andrew Ross and others who argue that the creative industries increasingly rely on the free labour of consumers and that this co-creativity may also contribute to the precarious employment conditions of professional creative workers. Working from the ethnography of Auran's co-creative relationship with the gamer fans and interviews with Maxis staff, this chapter explores when the actors themselves deploy the discourses of work and labour to shape their understandings of these relationships.

Although corporate developers extract value from these co-creative relationships, I argue this is not simply the case of exploiting unknowing fans as a source of free labour. These entanglements of the proprietary and the non-proprietary, the commercial and the non-commercial, are not necessarily an appropriation of fandom or the work of media consumers by corporate bottom-line agendas. Is the labour theory of value the best approach for understanding these emerging modes of organizing production, which rely on a fabric of often incommensurable loyalties, incentives, motivations and logics that often nevertheless work for mutual benefit? The very success of such co-creative game development projects relies on embracing the incommensurabilities among the actors participating in the making of this network. I argue that co-creative culture may not simply be a source of cheap content or unpaid and exploited labour.

Co-creative culture relations are hybrid and radically distributed collectives of amateur and professional, expert and non-expert emerging from the increasing reliance of the creative industries on user-led innovation and user-generated content. Co-creativity moves creative industries production and project practice from a closed industrial model of expertise toward an open and dynamic innovation system (Chesbrough 2003; Von Hippel 2006). User co-creation is a dynamic mechanism for coordination and change that potentially transforms business and consumer practices towards open innovation networks. Chapter 5, 'Co-creative expertise' draws on ethnographic research undertaken throughout 2007 following the final stages of Auran's development and release of *Fury*, a competitive, PvP, massively multiplayer online game, released in October 2007. I explore the relationships between Auran's professional developers and a network of game players who provided

Auran with extensive feedback and design input. I examine this problem of expertise as it unfolded, disrupting the development of *Fury*.

The final chapter, 'Modeling co-creativity: Multiple games' (with Jason Potts), elaborates our model of co-creativity as multiple games in the context of social network markets. Co-creativity is approached as a dynamic of co-evolution between markets and non-markets.

Defined by Potts et al. (2008) as markets in which consumers' choices are determined by the choices of others, the social network market model challenges the reductionist behavioural rationalism of traditional neoclassical economics. Social network markets explore and model co-creativity in the context of making choices. These choices, however, aren't exercised within the narrow behavioural incentives and motivations described by traditional microeconomic theory. This model is based on the notion that this is neither an economic nor a cultural phenomenon in itself, but rather the outcome of a co-evolutionary process between both economic and cultural domains. The ethnographic data that this book draws on suggests that *both* economic and cultural factors, intrinsic and extrinsic motivations, commercial and non-commercial incentives are simultaneously shaping co-creativity. This concerns not just how these domains provide the conditions for the others, but in terms of how they transform into each other. It is precisely this co-evolutionary dynamic in which cultural and economic opportunities are reconfigured simultaneously that gives rise to social network markets as an analytically meaningful approach to understanding co-creativity. This allows a complex interaction between the two domains and their associated motivations and incentives. I argue that it is precisely this co-evolutionary dynamic that help us to understand these co-creative relationships works and how they can work for mutual benefit. Rather than framing co-creativity in political economy terms by insisting that firms such as developers and publishers are exploiting gamer co-creators for surplus value and asking whether gamers are therefore in some sense unaware of, or perhaps misguided, about the conditions of these exchanges, we explore the conditions and characteristics of the often informed and canny choices that both developers and gamer consumers are exercising. However, these choices are not simply narrowly and economically reductionist 'rational choices'.

The book concludes with an interview with leading games designer Will Wright in which we discuss some future directions for co-creative culture and the challenges associated with understanding and crafting this emerging phenomenon. I argue that many of the challenges and dilemmas arising from co-creative culture may be best addressed through trial-and-error evolutionary mechanisms – adaptive and emergent, experimental and playful.