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Westecott, Emma

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Crafting Play: Little Big Planet

Emma Westecott
OCAD University
ewestecott@faculty.ocad.ca

Abstract

In the contemporary era of Web 2.0, high-tech consumer culture is increasingly engaged in the production of ‘user-generated content’ (UGC) for digital multicast. The tension between global homogeneity and the potential of technology to support multiple voices, histories and viewpoints is of central interest. The new DIY craft movement is successfully adopting Internet technologies to go straight to market as the digital generation increasingly engages in analogue craft practice. The swell of interest in craft values, both in objects and in hands-on feel and process exhibited in blogs such as *Wonderland* and distribution aggregators like *Etsy*, offers a productive frame that connects the digital and the analogue. Whether this reveals any anxiety about the intangibility of the digital or points to an increased creativity inspired by UGC remains open to question. The ‘feedback loop’ (to use Schechner’s (2002) term for the connection between an individual’s behavior and what they observe on street, stage and screen) between digital and real world practice, although far from literal, provides a frame for the dialogue between game form and culture at large. This paper teases out aspects of this feedback loop using examples from Sony’s PS3 series *Little Big Planet* (2008). The argument presented here does not deal with narratological or ludic structures and only tips its hat at the much broader field of fan culture but foregrounds context, style and characterization in its approach to analysis. The rationale for this approach is two-fold; first through the weight Media Molecule, developers of the game, give to visual communication and secondly through the prioritization of the invitation to create over and above the provision of a full triple-A title more typical of a console launch game.

Author Keywords

Game studies; play culture; craft; puppet; creative practice.

Context

This paper explores the connection between digital gaming and its interest in ‘user-generated content’ (UGC) via Sony’s PS3 series *Little Big Planet*. In an increasingly competitive marketplace the ongoing post-release relationship between player and game, facilitated through UGC, enables games publishers to engage their audience in an extended experience with the

intention of encouraging brand loyalty. What is of interest here is the ways in which this ongoing relationship is stylistically played out via an address to real world craft practice.

In a 2008 interview at the Wired Store, Alex Evans, Co-Founder of Media Molecule talked about the creative process that led to Little Big Planet¹. Identifying the console as pop culture, he positions Little Big Planet (LBP) in the middle of a spectrum of accessibility to UGC that ranged from Line Rider (<http://linerider.com>) to modding. The extension to a gaming experience offered by LBP is expressed in its mission to “Play. Create. Share”. These three processes signify the ambitions of the title to include its community in ongoing development, marginalizing any developer-authored game in the process of widening a brand focus on the creation and sharing of game experience. Media Molecule centered ambitions for ubiquity on the creation of ‘Sackpeople’ as expression of human’s surplus creativity².

From playing, modding and machinima to art practice, blogging and literature, the range of fan activity in game culture continues to spiral in new and exciting ways. The co-creative (Banks, 2002) play behavior solicited by LBP offer a specific series of ways in which players can engage with game form, as outlined below. Much has been made of the use of fan productivity (Wirman, 2009) to prove market interest and to create feedback loops between developers and gamers. This feedback loop increasingly impacts professional game design practice to refine and improve game product. For example, in a presentation at 2010’s *Canadian Game Studies Association Annual Conference*, in Montreal, Quebec, Jason Della Rocca discussed a rapidly evolving development model referred to as Minimum Viable Product (MVP) in which playable game betas offering small complete segments of a game are released to allow for revenue generation to start early on in the development process (Della Rocca, 2010). Sony’s investment in LBP as a launch title, with the game’s emphasis on the player as creator, reflects an interest in opening up to a wider gamer demographic. As a gated community closed off from the web this engagement with a community of players constitutes a first step in a much larger cultural change at Sony as part of an inevitable progression to open up to the wider Internet. One key change reflected by this move is an increased trend in gaming from ‘games-as-product’ to ‘games-as-service’. This weights the investment by the publishers far past the product release date and necessitates substantial investment in post-launch game management teams to maintain and manage online gaming communities.

A core aspect of networked technology is the growth in the explicit engagement of digital culture in self-expression and self-generated content (Banks, 2002). In its provision of a toolkit, Little Big Planet is far from the first game to enable its players to make levels by distributing a game editor, but LBP is one of the first commercial releases to center on the provision of a highly scaffolded set of tools. This makes building LBP levels more accessible to more people. Two interesting aspects of player creativity emerge from this experiment in stylized tool provision: the way in which LBP level builders often start from a reference to another game or film, thus reinforcing Piaget’s (1962) notion of imitation as an aspect of creative exploration. Secondly the game’s success in keying in to the New Craft Movement³ (Heimerl and Levine, 2008) through its chosen aesthetic and how this has expanded into real world handmade versions of Sackpeople, thus connecting digital gameplay practice to physical creative expression. The rhetoric of ‘play-as-creative-practice’ is exemplified in the advertising campaign of 2008’s Little Big Planet that reiterates LBP’s creation myth as arising from the creative imagination of human players. This framing addresses a world beyond the game and signals the developer’s intentions to extend the

game world to include future players in building the experience in a range of ways.

The authored 50 levels of the first LBP sold on disk constitute a fragment of the extended game text. In 2010, two years after release, with sales figures of 3 million and over 2 million LBP levels published, the game has so far been relatively effective in pulling its players into this ongoing creative act. From the capacity to customize Sackpeople to object collection, stickers and costumes, etc. the player is continually invited to decorate the game world. This activity offers an entry point into the self-creation of play spaces. LBP's editor allows the player to place high-level devices, from switches, levers and items from the player's main game control interface, referred to as the 'Popit', in a range of customizable scenes to sequence a game experience. Interestingly LBP's construction objects and tools extend the game's metaphor to include mechanical and functional components to allow players to usefully construct levels. Through a device called the Tool Bag LBP offers 'gadgets' that enable re-creation of functional aspects of the authored game. In addition to this the player is offered gameplay kits that relate specifically to game construction e.g. checkpoints, scoreboard, etc. Finally there are audio objects, backgrounds and global controls that affect environmental settings. In addition to tools to use in building, LBP authoring also consists of materials e.g. glass, sponge, etc. as well as glue, string, etc. reinforcing a craft metaphor for digital creation. This scaffolding is important in supporting a smooth learning curve with creative tools yet constrains the range of game mechanics and aesthetics that can be achieved by the budding game maker.

In addition to the above, in a recent article looking at player production in Little Big Planet, Sotamaa (2010) identifies an intended use of the game as a marketing platform for Sony via distribution of self-branded DLC (Down Loadable Content made available for purchase by the developers and also made by players for online sharing) in the form of costumes from other Sony titles. This encourages players to re-make these games within the LBP universe. With the release of LBP2 externally branded promotional content from companies as diverse as 7-Eleven and Toyota have been released for the franchise. Sotamaa also points to the ways in which the game's creators, Media Molecule, closely connect the gameplay experience to the game authoring experience by sharing game controls between gameplay and level creation controls to maximize familiarity.

Sign Systems of Digital Gameplay

From childhood we are keyed to identify and respond to signifiers of play, as a core human function (Caillois, 1961; Huizinga, 1955). Play activity is central in the development of human imagination (Piaget, 1962; Vygotsky, 1977). As sketched in previous work (Author, 2008), a focus on the performance of digital play allows for a celebration of the act of play as the central unifying force of game form, this prioritizes gameplay as performance act over both game structure and player behavior. Our familiarity with play, and playfulness, offers fertile ground in the opening up of digital game form to culture at large. The ongoing prioritization of play over and above skill display (although in reality both processes are tightly knit) represents a game industry move to build an inclusive approach to evolution of form. This change in emphasis is reflected by the focus in contemporary game advertising on the player happily engaged in the act of gameplay, rather than the emphasis on 3D quality high-action gameplay footage of previous generations of game advertising.

Prioritizing the fundamentally participatory, or interactive, nature of digital gaming, Myers (2003) points to recursive context-shifting structures in operation during gaming. This offers a way to conceptualize the ongoing dialogue between player and game. From a position of defining games through genres of action and role-playing Myers argues that the player repetitively engages in meaning-making activity in her route through digital gameplay. Broadly he splits a focus on conflict, as expressed in action games in which the visceral experience of play centers on a dynamic of opposition, against a focus on contextualization, as expressed in the role-playing genre in which the intellectual challenge is about understanding, or 'reading', the gameplay situation in order to move forward appropriately. In this view, digital games are keyed to a range of structures that prioritize different modes of gameplay and thus offer differing ways to construct meaning during the process of play. Although somewhat problematic as a framework to conceive of new forms that transgress existent genres e.g. games like Flower (2009) that provide visceral gameplay experience without recourse to conflict in it's core mechanic of flight, the dynamics of opposition and contextualization remain useful in conceiving of the meaning-making systems in operation during gameplay. For the player, gameplay presents a system of signification in which successful progression depends on the player's ability to decode and then master the control mechanics. Broadly, the sign systems specific to game form relate to the ongoing invitation to play, then to the progression of the player in game. For example, most objects that can be interacted with relate to development of the gameplay mechanic, whilst other objects are either part of the backdrop or omitted. Game landscapes signal routes for progression, and gamer movement through game worlds consist of a form of interrogation in which the mechanics are rapidly read, engaged with, achieved and then left behind in a mostly fast-paced progression to the next save-point, to the next challenge and on to the endgame. This future gaze of gameplay is developed in some detail in Atkins (2006) work. Thus, issues of game space, game rules and game time intermingle to construct a broad semiosis of gameplay within the frame of any one particular game.

My interest here is in another system of meaning making that occurs in game form, one that connects a game to its wider cultural setting. This phenomenon tends to function through the cultural practice of players in an expanding feedback loop between gameplay and surrounding context. Games continue to build traction as legitimate forms of experience and exert increasing influence on culture-at-large, percolating beyond specific gamer prosumer creative practice of modding and fan activity, whether it is online or offline, back to real world affect. Games like LBP mark a tipping point of significance to the game sector, moving it beyond the passionate niche of gamer sub-culture to mainstream intertextuality.

Much has been made in recent years of the increasingly convergent media landscape in which entertainment brands are realized in different media channels in a distributed network of experience (Bolter and Grusin, 2000; Jenkins, 2006). Ndalians (2004) points to the indebtedness of contemporary entertainment to the spectacles of the past by drawing connections between the baroque period of the late 16th century and a neo-baroque in the late 20th century. She observes that the baroque has risen to predominance in periods of rapid technological change and sketches a shared cultural delight in spectacle, virtuosity, seriality and an expanded sense of theatrical space. Ndalians's notion of convergent media threads as fragment points to the increased call for the viewer to actively participate in meaning-making activities. This model of networked experience that offers story fragments in different channels over time allows experienced creators to continue to build and extend diegetic worlds in a multitude of ways. These nodes can be built

in any story-telling media and the narrative fragment presented can occur at any place or time within the diegetic world. LBP doesn't originate from another media channel; it was made for the PS3, and latterly the PSP, and engages its players across the PlayStation Network and more recently the Internet. Future iterations of the fragment may well grow on other platforms and in different channels but the fragment functions in LBP in a slightly different way than in the wider media sphere. Rather than a network of connected narrative LBP consists more of a pie chart, in which a small slice represents the authored game levels with the intent that the game-buying public create the majority of the world using the tools provided by the developers.

The Rise of Craft

One of the central areas of interest in this paper is how the behavior of LBP players has moved beyond the pro-sumer habits of level creation and modding to traditional craft practice e.g. knitted Sackpeople, paper craft, costumes, cakes. This creates an interesting feedback loop between the developers, and their design decision to build a 'Craftworld' (the original working title for LBP) and the players and their uptake of this design motif outside of their digital gameplay experience. The stylistic tropes of the game encourage the player to engage in real world craft practice that re-makes the digital into a handmade artifact.

The rise of the digital has led to increased interest in DIY practice across all fields of human expression. This phenomenon is reflected across most digital platforms: from the Internet to television to music to gaming we all increasingly engage in expressive practice. Indeed it might seem that our digital tools exert pressure on us beyond creative expression to document and share the excruciating minutiae of day-to-day life filling the networks with endless and repetitive snapshots of life's key moments. Running in parallel to this, it is possible to notice a growth of domestic craft activity. One example of the phenomenal interest in this can be seen in the rise of Etsy. Etsy.com is an online shop-front for craft products and offers individuals a 'direct-to-customer' route that enables makers to earn money from their wares. Craft here includes an interest in electronic making via phenomena like the Maker Faire series of conventions (see <http://makerfaire.com>) as well as more traditional craft practice. Western culture's rising fascination with the handmade can be seen as a side effect of an increasingly digital existence. History demonstrates that rapid technological evolution often triggers specific cultural responses, for example the late 18th century Arts and Crafts Movement as a reaction against the rise of machine production in the U.K. However unlike the intentional nature of the Arts and Crafts Movement the current phenomena has, to-date, grown more organically -pun intended- supported by the peer-to-peer networks of the web.

Expressive Style

"...what you'll notice is that for every game it resembles, it also resembles something real."

Edge (2008)

Little Big Planet shrieks craft throughout its construction: felt, sack, fabric, cardboard, hand

drawn sketches, the textures that wallpaper the world, are all built from digital copies of analogue materials. This ‘sampling’ of the analogue exposes the apparatus of contemporary 3D production in which digital scans of real world materials are often used to ‘texture’ and thus decorate the 3D models used as the building blocks of game form. LBP’s use of craft textures and materials creates a nostalgic game world that signifies the familiar.

“We’ve given it a handmade look to celebrate imperfection. We hope people will feel comfortable.”

Kareem Ettourney, Edge (2008)

The handmade quality of this setting aims at closely connecting the impossible world of LBP with an idealized version of the real world we inhabit. This reference is made via an address to the craft construction of our children, an everyday domestic activity. LBP’s game world, or more closely, ‘theatrical sets’, directly address the real world playgrounds created by school children around the world in a way that is unlike the fantasy, ubiquitous or ‘nowhere’ spaces of much digital game form.

Ndalianis theorizes that games have no indexical relationship to the real world, yet I would argue that, through the afore-mentioned methods of production, games ‘sample’ representations of reality in their media creation techniques (e.g. texture creation, soundtrack, sound effects, motion data, etc.). Although not a direct relationship with lived reality, and particularly exposed in LBP’s expressive style, this embeds traces of the analogue deep in digital game worlds. In LBP some of the media content used to realize the game design speaks to a very British setting. From the use of voiceover from U.K. media icon Stephen Fry throughout the introduction, help videos and advertising to the inclusion of British chart-topping music as soundtrack LBP is self-consciously specific to the cultural setting of its making. The use of a 70s signature tune from a well-known and much-loved children’s television art and crafts program (Tony Hart's Vision On Gallery theme, see http://www.tonyhart.co.uk/take_hart.asp) specifically addresses a British adult’s nostalgic memory of their childhood.

“Computer games like EverQuest and Phantasmagoria also remind me... of little worlds in little boxes.”

Ndalianis, pg. 147 (2004)

Despite the spectacle of excess at play in contemporary game forms and the ever-increasing screens we play mainstream console games on, game worlds can be seen as miniature worlds. The reduction of scale from real world setting to in game representation necessitated through the screen makes the screen a miniature stage upon which we project “...a deliberately framed set of actions”. (Stewart, 1993, p. 54). In LBP the authored game levels are presented as a 2.5D platformer in which the player controls a Sack Person moving from stage left to stage right, negotiating a series of challenges and obstacles. This articulation is reminiscent of the sets created on the fly using props at hand in domestic scenes and on theatrical stages worldwide to

facilitate improvised play behavior. Whilst beautifully built, LBP's use of the platform genre tightly frames the game world on offer, both in terms of game space as 2.5D places gaming against a fixed stage, restricting movement in Z-depth (in effect building a proscenium arch within the screen to host gameplay) and removing the 3D horizon that pulls players forward in 3D gaming experience. LBP authored levels are relatively short and self-contained enabling episodic play sessions of restricted duration. The design decisions taken in building LBP reinforce the status of the game as a miniature world, and this is emphasized by the size of the player character, Sackboy, within the theatrical sets on offer. In this way LBP can be seen as a digital puppet theatre animated by up to four player performers engaged in gameplay thereby reinforcing a sense of familiarity with the play spaces of childhood.

We cannot separate the function of the miniature from a nostalgia for preindustrial labor, a nostalgia for craft.

Stewart, pg. 68 (1993)

So LBP, in visual style, genre use and game mechanic, continually points out of the context of its game world to a broader cultural setting in an intentional move to appeal to a non-hardcore gamer. The power of this approach is in its explicit address to play as nostalgic form. Nostalgia grows from the desire for a lost, and necessarily unobtainable, state of simplicity, authenticity and spontaneity. Through reference to this desire, and in its ambition to create an authentic play space, LBP signifies an ideal notion of accessible creativity that keys into contemporary aspiration.

Pre-dating notions of globalized industry; puppet theatre has evolved and survived in an ongoing discussion with specific geographical contexts, through local settings as ritual, then entertainment. Diverse forms of puppetry exist worldwide, offering a dynamic channel for cultural expression accessible to all and pragmatically responding to audience. Form has fixed in areas that have elevated particular puppetry styles to that of legitimate art form rather than of craft per se. In the more fluid forms that change over time and place it remains possible to trace common archetypes that re-surface time and again. For example, Punch stands as a British version of the trickster archetype evolved through puppet form directly from the 17th century Commedia Dell'Arte. As representation of the common man the puppet Punch has survived in a number of settings for a range of audiences, from street performance to domestic toy manipulated by children in home puppet theatres worldwide. Considered performing objects, puppets move fluidly from stage to toy and back again. Games are a similarly fluid form and can trigger strong feelings of nostalgia for past gaming experience. Games remain a popularist form, for now more firmly placed in the arena of entertainment than that of art. Whilst the liminal place that game art occupies has growing cultural impact, the power of LBP is in its self-conscious intertextuality, in the fragment of its game experience and how this invites its players into an authorial role in building levels, and into the future, more complete games.

Characterization

As a design technique aimed at triggering attachment, characterization can be seen to prioritize styles that clearly differentiate the designed artifact from its contemporary context. This is easily achieved with the hand-made, in which the flaws in production identify the unique nature of each object. Recent work (Author, 2009) has connected game's player characters with puppet form as both control mechanic and metaphor for expressive range. Sackpeople conform to Disney standards of proportion for classic character design and thus have a connection to the 'cute' aesthetic visible throughout much game form. Sackpeople are customizable, not just in appearance but also in allowing for 'dress-up' using both library and DLC costumes normally sold as packs of parts (e.g. skin, clothes and eyes for anything up to US \$6). Sackpeople are reminiscent of amigurumi in style (means 'knitted stuffed toy' in Japanese and reportedly the most popular items for sale on Etsy.com (Belton, 2006)), the original Sackboy textured in brown knitted fabric with button eyes and a zip up the stomach. The ability to customize your Sackboy suggests a possibility for player character as doll. Sackpeople embody the designer's stated interest in visual communication, s/he doesn't talk, this removal of a voice makes much sense in production terms, allowing the title to be internationalized with little effort. It also reinforces a comparison with puppets, in that "the separation of word and action is precisely that which constitutes the puppet play" (Proschan, 1983, p. 47). Although narrowing the communication channels between game and player, the tight binding of movement to controller supports an almost over-responsive 'feel' to controlling Sackboy. Gameplay requires a semiotic approach that includes visual and kinesic systems of signification over and above a singular focus on verbal language.

The paratext to the game is presented with a natural history documentary approach in the wide mix of media built around the game. Sack-people are characterized as motivated and mischievous owners of the game world, always on the move with no other intent than to play.

When manipulated by human beings – adults or children – toys embody all the temptations and responsibilities of power... and when toys come alive as beings created by humans usually male they replicate divine creation and imply vital possibilities for human creativity...

Kuznets, p. 2 (1994)

LBP's focus on Sackboy extends the notion of a plaything to an auto-animated context. As a character, Sackboy signals toy through the player's ability to 'dress' him whilst signaling game puppet through his ludic orientation. The connection drawn here between LBP and puppetry is explicitly referenced in the marketing material for LBP2 in which 'digital puppetry' is offered as a way of including non-player characters in authored games. Sackboy is a mobile sign of an immobile object. Puppets function through stylistic condensation via techniques such as hyperbole (enlargement), litotes (reduction) and material expression - all approaches on display in LBP. Control signifiers for Sackboy are differentiated to movement, customization and acting in which the player can put Sackboy into set moods and trigger specific movements intended for social moments during multi-play. This final category extends the function of Sackboy beyond the setting of the game moment to allow the player to play with Sackboy. This liberates Sackboy from the game context and allows the player character to act as an instrument through which the players get the opportunity to express themselves using emote-like facial expressions and

movement signatures. Indeed Sackboy has been liberated from the LBP world to appear in other game titles. Like puppet theatre, games use specific lexicons of gesture to signal mood and activity. This is important to the emergence of 'character as interface' beyond specific game settings that can be seen in the ongoing growth of manufactured versions of Sackboy available for purchase online and coming soon to a toy store near you⁴.

Culturally-aware Game Design

LBP broadens Sony's interest in UGC thereby signifying attempts to explicitly include the player, and co-creative fan activity, within the core gaming experience. By signifying playful creative activity in both game style and surrounding media, LBP aims at a wide and mainstream player base. What is important about this is how the game addresses adult nostalgia for childhood activity thus signifying 'achievable' creativity.

The rise of interest in craft values and techniques as supported by social media can be seen as an example of a meme (a term introduced by Richard Dawkins (1976) to indicate an idea that can be considered a replicator), in that the growth of interest in hands-on and handmade craft practice has grown through DIY practice. The meme of the handmade, as picked up by Media Molecule in 2008 in the design and development of Little Big Planet reflects a growing awareness by game designers of the power of game form to reference culture in the widest possible sense. Through its address to craft aesthetics LBP marks an evolution in game form in its reflection of the culture of its production and in its explicit appeal to DIY. LBP's approach both intentionally encourages fans to build digital game levels and, perhaps more accidentally, has fed back into real world craft practice through the creation of Sackpeople. In LBP, a digital puppet theatre is created and populated by moving amigurumi Sackpeople, referencing the aesthetics of popular toy theatres to make players 'feel comfortable' engaging in game-play experience. LBP's emphasis on play as creative practice in a highly structured environment aims at allowing players more access to the game-making side of fan activity. However, as Sotamaa (2010) concludes, the increased emphasis on player production in LBP appeals to a relatively small group of expert 'player-developers' whilst the majority of players experiment without taking up the offer to produce and publish finished levels.

The market for games continues to diversify and the routes to market become ever more complex in the move online. Whilst online distribution channels proliferate and tools like Steam reinvigorate PC gaming, the industry zaibatsu (Sony, Nintendo and Microsoft) struggle to find ways of making the network pay. Huge investment in the walled gardens of online gaming by the console-makers have not as yet led to a clear winner in this space. As the release of Little Big Planet 2 (2011) - in contradiction to the stated intention not to release any further boxed product - clearly shows, worthy experiments like this, whilst being critically acclaimed, have not as yet succeeded in proving commercial value beyond the sales return of boxed product. The question of how the inclusion of the gamer in the creative act of game making adds to the coffers of the mainstream game publishers remains very much unanswered. Despite this, the design techniques employed in development of this title, as sketched above, mark an increased awareness by some developers of the tropes of digital culture. In this way, LBP effectively demonstrates a possibility for games to succeed by addressing the specificity of their context of production and to grow through active engagement with cultural 'feedback loops'.

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¹ <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=WETeWdoz3cw>

² See in-game intro at <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=R1UccrG4ba4>

³ The New Craft Movement is a formalized description of an international group of DIY craft-makers who self-organize using the internet to sell direct to buyers using websites like <http://etsy.com> and speaks to the rising popularity of the handmade.

⁴ Collections of blind-sealed mini PVC figurine Sackpeople have been released in the U.K. to coincide with the launch of *Little Big Planet 2* (2011) as *Sackboy Superstars Series 1: Around the World*. See <http://www.electronictheatre.co.uk/index.php/playstation3/playstation3-news/6975-new-littlebigplanet-figure-series-launched> (Last accessed 19/03/2011).