

Remaking Each Other's Dreams¹: Player Authors in Digital Games

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ABSTRACT

One of the more interesting and distinct aspects of the digital game genre is the proliferation of player-produced content and artifacts. The reworking of original game materials is an integral part of game culture that can not be ignored in the study of these games. This paper explores player-production as a mode of authorship reflecting the agency of the game player.

INTRODUCTION

From now on in computer gaming, there were to be no real barriers between creator and audience, or producer and consumer. They would be collaborators in the same imaginative space, and working as equals, they'd create a new medium, together.

—Wagner James Au, Salon [2]

Digital game players enjoy unprecedented access to their media. Designers participate in player discussions, implement player suggestions in existing games, and openly provide players with tools to facilitate the production of player content. When they don't, players still find ways to use games to their own ends. Players hack and alter game code and graphics, play in new and undetermined contexts, and occasionally cross over the divide to produce their own games. In other words, they not only use the digital game as a mediated experience, but often as a media in and of itself.

Interactive media, such as digital games, are often examined in terms of agency—an attributed, contextual power to affect meaningful change. However, this focus is often internal, examining an interactor's means of affecting change within the context provided by the interactive designer. Authorship in the digital game environment lies at the intersection of designer/player agencies. At the level of player-created objects, or *artifacts*, the player's agency extends beyond an instantiation of the designers agency to the authorship of something new. This artifact, in turn, becomes a vessel of the player's agency, and plays a key role in the social recognition of that player's authorship.



Figure 1: Screen from Counter-Strike (with Velvet-Strike graffiti spray). By permission of Anne-Marie Schleiner.

COMPUTER GAMES AND PLAYER PRODUCTION

Computer games have been around for over 40 years (ancient in computing terms), but it is in the past few decades games have come into their own

¹ From Wagner James Au, Salon [2].

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as a medium. Games have become a prominent part of the cultural landscape, challenging the film and television industries in terms of revenue and attracting the attention of mainstream media, lawmakers, academics, artists, and the (non-gaming) public.

Digital games maintain a creation and dissemination culture that tends to be more prolific than any other type of consumer entertainment product, with the possible exception of electronic music's DJ culture. In certain genres (notably the first-person shooter, or FPS), few popular games exist without sites devoted to exchanging tips and tricks, tools and modifications. Player production ranges from meta-gaming collectives to recombinant performances; from player-to-player design tools to game modifications (*mods*). It is estimated 10 to 20% of "hard-core gamers" participate in the creation and download of game modifications² [2]. According to game researchers Salen and Zimmerman, player production can both expand *modes* of play (providing new ways of playing), and *contexts* available for the exchange of meaning. This production may operate from the outside in (bringing new elements into the game) or from the inside out (using in-game elements for extra-game purposes)[29]. For example, players in Persistent World³ games such as Ultima Online and Everquest have held in-game weddings, created a virtual prostitute service [20], held online protests over Sony policy [8], gathered for 9-11 candlelight vigils [34], held naked siege to virtual towns⁴, created seasonal events (including a Santa Claus character)[18], and acted out rituals [6], all without support or encouragement from the game creators, and often without the addition of new elements to the existing game. Players have remediated cinema in the form of *machinema*—the use of game engines to create and present movie-like scenarios. In some cases, entire games are

² This data largely reflects First Person Shooter (FPS) mod makers [2] that exist in the so-called "hard-core" gaming community. I would suspect the wider community of mod makers and users is much larger, particularly when low-level modifications such as Sims mods are included. This is certainly an area where more research data is needed.

³ Also called MMOG or MMORPG games.

⁴ Inflicted on the players of Microsoft's Asheron's Call, in 2001 (personal account).

used as part of a larger, meta-game⁵, as is the case with collectives such as player guilds, which maintain their own rules and structures and may often move nomadically from game to game.

DIGITAL AUTHORSHIP

I use the term *authorship* in relation to digital games, aware of its problematic tie to the notion of the written word as textual artifact. Digital games consist of multiple "texts," including (but not limited to) the written, visual, and the enacted. The very notion of authorship (and agency for that matter) has been thrown into contest as a result of the Postmodern dissolution of the subject: the argument against a Modernist view of a stable, bounded, rational self which is the origin for action and discourse. The Postmodern argument contributes to the recognition of the author as a construct formed by society, towards specific ends, at a particular time and place (as opposed to an objective Truth). Michel Foucault provides an interesting history of the author construct going back to the Renaissance, where it became important for the creator of a text to be accountable for that work, to provide an ethos for the work (a guarantee of truth and validity), and eventually, a lived history. In other words, the life of the author became a context in which to situate the work: a wellspring of supplementary information from which (the appropriate authorities) may create a valid interpretation of the text [12]. Roland Barthes denies the work any extension beyond the text, instead placing the intersection of influence, culture and relationships at the point of reader reception. In this sense, the work is no longer a representation, but a process of construction—a speech act in progress. For Barthes, the text's value is not in determining the preferred meaning of an "author-god," but in acting as a "multi-dimensional space in which a number of texts are married and disputed and none is original [3]." The later notion is, in fact, a promising description of modern game culture, in which the barriers between the designer and player are often permeable.

⁵ *Meta-game*: Extra-game activities that surround the actual gameplay. Meta-game activities may none-the-less be integral to the game itself, for example, the collecting and ordering of cards in a (non-digital) collectable card game.

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George Landow also examines issues of authorship, pertaining to hypertext. In this medium, Landow sees the role of the reader and writer as intertwined [23]. Because the authority and autonomy of the text is called into question, the figure and function of author is eroded. Landow's view of the text as imperfect and artificially autonomous does not necessarily demonstrate the lack of an author, merely a denial of a readers' submission to authority [23]. In other words, for Landow, the interactive author forfeits their agency. Landow clarifies what he sees as the three challenges to the hypertext author's authority, all of which have parallels in game authorship: a lack of autonomy in the text, the concept of text as network, and/or the removal of the imposed limits of textuality [23]. The latter comes from Foucault, who questioned how one determines the scope of an author's oeuvre: Does it include commentary on the works? Unpublished materials? Laundry lists [11]? In the world of digital game authorship, the imposed limits of textuality, in particular, are highlighted by the player-as-producer. Suggesting agency as an indicator of authorship for works of modification, adaptation, re-creation and remediation, can be a useful tool in attempting to delineate the boundaries of both primary and derivative works, or perhaps demonstrating the futility of this endeavor. This is not to say the dissolution of the author may not be valuable—Foucault, for one, was ready to trade the cult of the author for the immortality of the text. The “death of the author” can be seen as a deliverance and an extension: simultaneously negating, preserving and elevating the original work [28]. However, while cultural attribution of agency and authorship persist (and we still live in a society dominated by the tenets of Modernism), we will make attempts to assume agency through authorship, whether it is through the creation of an original work or the reconstruction of a previous work. Agency and authorship are causally attributed to both primary and derivative media producers.

To quote game theorist/artist Celia Pearce: “It is ironic that, although a virtual parade of literary theorists (Barthes, Foucault, Derrida, L'Dieux, et al) have spent four decades proclaiming the death of the author, it is not authors but game designers who have been able to innovate most boldly in the author-creator control negotiation [27].” What

does it mean to be an author in a medium such as that of digital games, where teams construct the media product, only to have it continually reworked by the supposed audience? For broadcast media, this issue is quickly resolved in favour of the media producer, by virtue of both the restricted means of production and channels of distribution. Past attempts at open media reworking, such as scratch video, ultimately suffered from lack of access to the medium [16]. Michel de Certeau's influential work on audience tactics reflects this unequal relationship between producer and consumer—the audience is in constant struggle to contend with producer strategies [5]. But in the digital arena, distribution networks arise spontaneously and flourish; code provides an insecure and malleable canvas for recombinant works. Games retain a historic tie to the hackers with whom they originated ([21], [31], [24]), creating an inward division between the “information wants to be free” ethos and the growing corporate nature of game production. This tension is increasingly apparent, as extensions of corporate ownership leave us “in a cultural space in which people have little say in shaping and reappropriating artifacts [33].” That we even anticipate this freedom demonstrates a notable shift in cultural perspective on the nature of media.

GAME PLAYERS AS AUTHORS

My initial motivation was probably the same as everyone else in the mod-scene...I just wanted to customize the game to fit my vision of what a game should be. First and foremost it is my vision, not anyone else's..

— Minh Le, Creator, Counter-Strike [14]

Player-production emerges due to a convergence of both technological and societal imperatives. On a fundamental technological level, games are recreated by players because they are code worlds, and as such, hackable⁶ [21]. Recreating and adapting original works is echoed in other media as they become digitized, most prominently in electronic music, where digital sampling has become the mainstay of DJ culture. The creators are often media outsiders, newly introduced to the

⁶ Hacking understood here and throughout this thesis as a generic term related to reconstitutive programming, rather than illicit computer *cracking*.

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tools of production. According to artist Erikki Huhtamao, these secondary producers possess “the aim of subverting the existing relationship between subjects and media [16],” although I would suggest this aim is often not explicit. Antoinette LaFarge identifies three triggers for the popularity of digital game manipulation; including the rapid manufacture and distribution of game titles, lax copyright enforcement, and a culture of involvement on the part of players [22]. Popular game writer J.C. Herz takes a similar view, citing a cultural assumption—that end-users can, will and perhaps should design game objects, and a social ecology that supports the exchange and production of this material within the game community [14]. This ecology may also be the primary designer—Pearce notes “while the traditional entertainment industry is frantically trying to thwart the Tsunami with teaspoons,” the game industry tends to acknowledge, and even encourage, audience usurpation of design authority [27].



Figure 2: Screen from Desert Combat, Battlefield 1942 mod. Figure by author.

Because games, by definition, operate in an inherently artificial environment, they accommodate a recognition of the game structure and its potential for mutation. Players are at an advantage in recognizing the constructed experience—both the designer's agency in their prescribed actions, and the possibility of their own agency through potential artifacts. The social nature of modern multi-player online games also reinforces this notion of the constructed game, as players are made aware of the creative actions of their fellow players. This aligns with Bernie De

Koven's description of games as social fictions, continually created by their players [7]. De Koven reminds us that the manner in which a game is played can be as important as the game by definition. This raises an interesting question: is a game bound by the context set out by the game designer, or can it be reinterpreted by the play community? In the context of current digital games, player authorship demonstrates that, in reality, reinterpretation is simply a part of game play and agency.

Espen Aarseth states, “to elevate a consumer group to producerhood is a bold political statement; and in the production and consumption of symbolic artifacts (texts) the boundaries between these positions becomes a highly contested ground [1].” Continuing interest and debate over the player-as-producer reinforces Aarseth's questioning of the boundaries between production and consumption, prompting us to question the relationship between designer and player, but also the politicizing of said relationship. The boundaries between game designer and player are arguably more permeable than most other media, and this relationship, for the most part, is recognized and embraced, rather than being a source of conflict [27]. As such, facilitating player production can allow game designers to reinforce their own agency as game creator, while still encouraging the agency of the game player. Eric Zimmerman's pronouncement, that “there is something deeply satisfying about creating a game that allows players to participate as designers in their own right,” [29] is increasingly common at game design conferences and in the press. While game designers tend to design for the masses, they may explicitly or implicitly encourage players to change what they don't like about a given experience. A growing number of game producers passively support player-production by allowing networks of game modifications to exist unchallenged, or actively support it, at least as they envision it, through the open release of game engines, modification tools and distribution networks. Players have the opportunity for direct manipulation of a given design, encouraging active user engagement in creatively extending that design to fit their own vision of the experience. Such distributed design tools (*convivial tools*) “have the potential to break down the strict counterproductive barriers between consumers and

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designers [10].” While a relative minority of players participate in the creation of independent artifacts, their contribution to the overall game community ensures a constant, vibrant flow of new game content into the play arena. This has become an integral part of gaming culture and experience.

LaFarge observes that industry encouragement of player content and customization, even within a designer's authored environment, heightens a player's sense of ownership in the game. This, in turn, may problematize issues of agency and control (prompting the question, to what extent designers are then responsible to these player-producers and to the game community at large? [22]). In the context of an internal agency, an agency affected by the secondary agency of the game designer, this feeling of ownership relies more on the player's efficacy, the belief that they are contributing to the construction of their experience (and the success of the designer's creation of that aesthetic). However, in the creation of a game artifact, the player demonstrates an agency distinct from the game designer, and thus outside the scope of the designer's responsibility. While beyond the focus of this paper, this does raise some interesting questions in relation to offensive or difficult player artifacts. Some companies are quick to quash unfavourable user extensions, while others allow a free market of player generated content to continue. The possibility for a modified experience to subvert, or reflect badly, on the design brand is one of the challenges of a shared creative role. “Although the game industry tries hard to maintain the impression that computer gaming constitutes ‘a people's technology which encourages and enables participation by all who wish to participate,’” states Huhtamao, “it is becoming more and more evident that such a position constitutes a fabrication and, above all, an ideology [16].” In other words, the player-as-producer paradigm is fine as long as it generates positive content and increased revenue—as long as it retains the favour of the primary author, the game producer. This becomes contentious as the agency of the designer bleeds beyond the boundary of the game, and into the player-produced artifact. In the hybrid circumstances where these agencies often overlap, the game community may validate claims of authorship from either designer or player.

THE PLAYER AUTHOR

The search for the well-played game is what holds the community together. But the freedom to change the game is what gives the community its power.

— Bernie De Koven [7].

Player-production provides an interesting base from which to explore the meaning of agency in the context of the digital (primarily online) game. The relationship between the agency of the game player and designer reconfigures traditional notions of authorship, suggesting a more open, dynamic environment for the creation of meaning—a conversation as opposed to a broadcast. For the game designer, this may mean a different design approach is necessary to encourage and/or accommodate a more open concept of the game. For the game player, there already exists the awareness that digital games, like most real world games, provide the opportunity for expression through the modification and manipulation of the game itself. The mark of a game's success may come to be, not simply the number of units sold, but how broadly the game has lent itself as a canvas for the expression, extension, and/or reinforcement of a game culture.

Player-created artifacts not only affect our understanding of cultural production, but also challenge our definition of what constitutes *the game*. A common criticism levied at player-production is that it falls outside of the boundaries of the game, into the realm of meta-game, and as such assumes this production cannot be studied as part-and-parcel of the game itself. The notion that in redefining game boundaries one is no longer playing the same game is articulated by Bernard Suits [32], and reveals a definition of author that privileges the original producer. This is increasingly a contentious construct, as players demand (and assert) more control over production. Through the authorship of game artifacts, players bring the game beyond the scope of the designer's agency, into something the designer could not foresee or plan for. Aarseth argues this is not governed by the laws of the medium but “the aesthetic exploitation and subversion of said laws [1].” I would disagree with the implication player creation is necessarily subversive, instead insisting the player's agency exists through the medium, and is thus a natural extension of the human desire for

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expression. De Koven's description of the well-played game seems closer to the current cultural environment: the game can change for the better with the discovery of a new source of control that presents a new way of seeing the game played together [7]. Rather than the game designer mandating a game experience, the relationship has the potential to become more symbiotic, by accommodating the authorship of the game player. For Pearce, this invitation to the audience to create or co-create the content, allows all participants "to entertain each other with their unique way of 'playing the story' [27]." In the end it is up to the play community that maintains the balance between the game as intended and the game as it is played [7]. Similarly, in digital games, it is the game community that, in the end, validates and negotiates both designer and player agencies.



Figure 3: *Tiny Signs of Hope* (anti-war) posters in *The Sims*. Figure by author.

The relationship between game player and designer has broad implications for how we interact with our media. Bolter and Grusin state, "networked games make a claim to improve on the social practice not only of other computer games, but of television and film as well [4]." The artificiality of games draws attention to game constructs (including those that can be seen as media), allowing a fluctuation between engagement (which may allow for critical distance) and immersion ([4], [9], [25]). A number of researchers have identified the suitability for games for cultural commentary ([30], [13], [19]). Salen and Zimmerman note that because games are artificial constructs that involve meta-

communication about the act of play their cultural identity is always present: "(Games) are very good at revealing cultural assumptions at work [29]." According to Taylor, artifacts created by game players are just one means of creative production situated within existing cultural works: "These reworkings highlight malleability of cultural elements, and the way they are made real through engagement with their audiences [33]."

Player content draws attention to the borders of the game, and blurs relationships between producer/consumer, fan/developer, and programmer/hacker. Salen and Zimmerman describe one persistent world performance⁷ as "(modifying) the game itself as it transformed the attitudes and assumptions of player and game designer alike [29]." This suggests a powerful role for the player-producer that may at times supersede that of the primary game designer. Players have the opportunity to act as *cultural hackers*, with the capacity to, as Anne-Marie Schleiner describes, "manipulate existing techno-semiotic structures towards different ends or, as described by artist Brett Stalbaum, 'who endeavour to get inside cultural systems and make them do things they were never intended to do' [30]." Mod maker John Cook (*Team Fortress*) describes the result as "a living product" [21], and indeed these reworked games appear more as a cultural exchange than a static artifact. The opportunity for games to act as media has just scratched the surface: their potential to act as an interactive, participatory medium carries with it tremendous potential for cultural exchange. Player agency as the author of game artifacts represents a shift in access to the means of cultural production, opening up the digital game as a means of expression.

This paper introduces a new type of player: the *player author*. This player is empowered not only in the interpretation of meaning, but in the creation of new meanings that can, in turn, affect not only other players, but game designers themselves. This is a player who, as Wright, Boria and Braidenbach note, "(moves) with a reflexive awareness of the game's features and their

⁷ This refers to the invention of a pimp character "Pimp Daddy," and his prostitute "Jenny," using in-game affordances in *Ultima Online* [29].

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possible modifications [35]." The agency of this derivative author is revealed in the production of new meanings, independent of the original author. As such, the power dynamic between designer and player changes (creating a closer, mutually respectful relationship that can already be observed in game culture). The potential for agency through authorship may change the nature of how one perceives the game environment, and how much control is felt in participating in cultural production. This may also affect the aesthetic satisfaction of yielding to a designer's agency that dominates current interactive media, as players are increasingly validated in their game communities as authors. How this will play out in the continuing development of digital game culture is yet to be seen.

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