



Imaginarities of ownership: The logic of participation in the moral economy of 3D software design



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ABSTRACT

This article is designed to learn more about the increasing importance attributed to the logic of user participation and sharing (associated with the neoliberal Web 2.0) within and across institutional and platform boundaries. It aims to yield insight into the boundaries of a digital ethics in this context. For this purpose, the study draws on a prominent instance of 3D/games software culture where interdependencies can be seen to develop between institutions, users, and ICTs directing our attention to the exploration of 'ownership', thereby highlighting the boundaries of participation and competition. Drawing out the dynamics of ownership is an useful stratagem to yield insight into the mechanisms of production and cooperation. By interrogating the (organization of) social imaginaries involved as a means to draw out how different actors understand and make sense of these cross-border dynamics, it yields a perspective of ownership vis-à-vis the logic of participation, emphasizing – rather than legal conceptions per se – the make-up of negotiations and renegotiations guided by a distributed morality in software development between and across various institutional and platform boundaries.

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1. Introduction: participation, creativity and commercialization

MySpace is at home at News Corporation's place. YouTube broadcasts itself with Google. Instagram shares photos with Facebook. These are riveting illustrations where Web 2.0 (O'Reilly, 2005) is put to work, that is, the users of these services rather than their hosts. Widely adopted in the scholarly literature, the term Web 2.0 can be seen to point to a shift from a static perspective on Web content delivery towards a more dynamic perspective, where Web tools, applications and services are put into the hands of people who are regarded as participants rather than as end users. Thus, the likes of MySpace, YouTube, and Instagram may bring particular digital technology and expertise to the tables of News Corp., Google, and Facebook, but mostly they bring in a vast and rapidly growing community of users. And, which can also be witnessed in the public domain where, beyond mere transparency and service improvement, the opening up of government data can increasingly be seen to enable and facilitate citizens to participate in the production of e-government information and services by freely using, repurposing, creating value out of and even co-produce; suggesting that, under the right circumstances, co-creation practices can turn public services into more effective and transparent ones associated with improved public services and uptakes, and which is said to present an important role for citizens themselves (UN, 2012).

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Captured by conceptualizations such as convergence culture (Jenkins, 2006, cf. 'participatory culture'), produsage (Bruns, 2008), wealth of networks (Benkler, 2006), and like economy (Gerlitz and Helmond, 2013), this 'participatory turn' (OECD, 2007) is reflected in debates about the claimed democratization of information and communication technologies (ICTs) such as the Internet. Although stemming from different perspectives and, perhaps, encapsulating different aspects, they all seem to point to a convergence of production, distribution, and consumption practices and a blending of user creativity, collaboration, and sharing-enabled and sharing-assisted network technologies – often, with particular attention to a shift in power relations. A broad spectrum of user engagement can be detected ranging from low-level inputs such as simple communication interactions such as a 'like' on Facebook and product reviews, to high levels of participation or creativity, such as the generation of elaborate mash-ups uploaded onto YouTube and total conversion modifications of games.

This combination of 'sociality' and 'technology' can be seen to yield a complex ecosystem where community dynamics and commerce intersect, underpinning discussions about (novel) configurations between the private and public domains, between the gift and the exchange economies, between amateurism and professionalism, between emerging and established structures. In this view, a 'participatory culture logic' – associated with living with and in ICTs underpinned by pervasive knowledge-intensive and information-rich user-created content and sharing practices (Silverstone, 2006), has emerged as a significant aspect of the knowledge-based economy. And, which tends to adhere to the prevailing vision of the information society of economic-centricity in its reliance on market mechanisms rather than that its significance is put forward for non-market forces associated with a 'sharing culture logic' (cf. Mansell, 2012).

While this blurring of production and consumption practices is not a new phenomenon, it has become more salient in the context of digital technologies facilitating those diverse and everyday practices on a wider scale, engaging, for example, firms to look at the consequences for commercial interests as, in many cases, participatory Web sites represent successful illustrations of a rapidly evolving (yet often subtle) relationship of collaboration with users across institutional boundaries. While some research has focused on orientations such as a 'lurker/poster' dichotomy (or, passive/active participation), location of consumption practice, participation qualities such as social and topical involvement, not much systematic research is yet available that focuses on how users participate on such sites, what they contribute, and with what frequency they interact with others (van der Graaf, f.c.). In particular, not much attention has been given to this uneasy relationship between productive engagement of users and (private and public) institutions, where users can act as voluntary, often freely, contributors of knowledge and contents/complements, and generating value for the entire – and, extended – platform (cf. Nieborg and van der Graaf, 2008).

An increasing interest can be detected, however, in multi-sided platform business models that include users that participate and contribute to a digital site, offering a greater potential for (market) growth by harnessing the (entrepreneurial) drive of participating users in existing or new sites guided by the enabling platform. Contributing users have this constellation space at their disposal to work in, negotiate with and reconfigure. The institution can thus strategically access the knowledge provided that once was outside its boundaries. Such a multi-sided platform approach highlights a more collaborative set up, on the one hand, and a more competitive one, on the other. And while, arguably, this dynamic cannot be understood as mutually exclusive possibilities, ethical concerns for both institutions and users have become apparent. With the blurring boundaries between private and public interactions and institutional and mediated interpersonal communication (Couldry et al., 2013), a systematic investigation is warranted into questions, such as about the nature and extent of the expression of private views online, the relevance of today's governing principles of freedom of expression (cf. Madianou, 2013), the playing out of the relations of emerging participatory behaviors and practices at the grass-roots level of users and institutional workplaces (cf. Banks, 2013), and the kinds of (new and dispersion of) rewards.

This article, therefore, is designed to learn more about the increasing importance attributed to the logic of participation and sharing within and across institutional and platform boundaries. It aims to yield insight into the boundaries of a digital ethics in this context. For this purpose, the study draws on a prominent instance of 3D/games software culture where interdependencies can be seen to develop between institutions, users, and ICTs directing our attention to the exploration of 'ownership', thereby highlighting the boundaries of participation and competition. Drawing out the dynamics of ownership is an useful stratagem to yield insight into the mechanisms of production and cooperation (cf. van Dijck, 2013). By interrogating the (organization of) social imaginaries involved as a means to draw out how different actors understand and make sense of these cross-border dynamics, it yields a perspective of ownership vis-à-vis the logic of participation, emphasizing – rather than legal conceptions per se – the make-up of negotiations and renegotiations guided by a distributed morality in software development between and across various institutional and platform boundaries.

The structure of this article is as follows: The next section presents an overview of the used methodology. This is followed by drawing out the (contested) nature of ownership vis-à-vis the logic of participation via the conceptualizations of moral economy, distributed morality and the social imaginary. The fourth section explores these elements at hand in the dynamics of 3D software design at Linden Lab. The article concludes with a discussion of the findings demonstrating how an ethical infrastructure is reflected in the distributed participation logic associated with the moral economy.

2. Methodology

In examining the mechanisms of ownership associated with the co-evolution of production and cooperation practices within and across platform boundaries, generally two perspectives can be discerned, the administrative, or instrumental,

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