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Is this still participation? A case study of the disempowerment of player labourers

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ABSTRACT
Critical research into games and player labour has shown that player creators remain disempowered despite the impact of their work. On the other hand, player-creators enjoy their work, they freely and in an informed manner consent to working without pay, and they can use their unpaid labour as experience and CV-entries. This paper aims to critically discuss these arguments in the light of a specifically chosen case study. The analysis is informed by expert interviews of player creators and it uses Carpentier's (2016) analytic framework for participatory processes. This analysis of the power relationship between player creators and game developer is elemental for the discussion around unpaid player labour. In this case the company has enough power to purposefully keep the involvement of players secret which supports the notion of exploitation of free labour. The discussion suggests possible ways forward and connects to the ongoing unionization movement in the industry.

Keywords
participation, co-creation, digital games, digital media, critical media studies, affective labour, power, player-created content,

INTRODUCTION
Critical research into games and player labour has shown from several perspectives that player creators make considerable and far-reaching contribution to game development, game design, and the bottom-line of the games industry while largely remaining exploited and disempowered. However, there a number of arguments that aim to justify and defend this use of unpaid player labour. One of them argues that the exploitation of player labour is acceptable because player-creators enjoy their work, because they freely and in an informed manner consent to working without pay, and because they can use their unpaid labour as a kind of internship and translate it into CV-entries and paid positions. This paper aims to critically discuss these arguments in the light of a specifically chosen case studies of player participation in the creation of the interface of World of Warcraft (Blizzard Entertainment, 2006)(hereafter WoW). While this case is already somewhat aged, there are two reasons for why it is relevant. First, some information about this case has been a secret with player participants under Non-Disclosure Agreement (NDA) and second this case does offer a level of insight that comes from a historic perspective and the retrospective of the player participant. The paper will analyze this case using the analysis steps focused on power in Carpentier's (2016) analytical framework for participatory processes. The research question of this paper is:

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In what ways can we understand unpaid player labour in a specifically chosen case of co-creative game design as consensual and freely agreed on if we critically analyze the power relationship between the player creators and the game producers?

THEORY

The theory chapter will first examine previous research perspectives on player participation in the creation of digital games. It will start out discussing the extent of player co-creation, then it will explain the arguments that legitimize the use of free player labour in their most defensible version, to finally explain the theoretical model for political participation with its focus on power as a useful means for discussing this question.

Extent of player participation in game development and design

MMOs (massively multiplayer online games) and virtual worlds require player participation in order to become functioning games or places (Bartle 2004). However, also the creation of game economy, game culture, and even parts of gameplay, are dependent on player creations (Pearce 2006; Pearce, Boellstorff, and Nardi 2011; Taylor 2006a, 2006b, 2009). The analysis of player-created content, like interface modifications (Golub 2010; Prax 2012, 2015) and collective learning tools, shows that the influence of player participation does extend to the design of the game itself (Prax 2016). Player co-creators also produce a substantial financial profit for the games industry (Banks 2013; Banks and Humphreys 2008; Humphreys 2005; Postigo 2007, 2010). The use of unpaid player labour by the industry has led to discussions around exploitation (Terranova 2003), precarity (Kücklich 2005), and power struggles (Kow and Nardi 2010a). However, these critical perspectives are contradicted by alternative views which de-prioritizes a political economy perspective on co-creation in game development.

Player participation as open innovation and labour of love

One argument that is frequently used here is that unpaid work of players is a kind of play. The fact that players enjoy their work or that the work is connected to a game in some way does not hold a lot of merit if it is used as an argument to lessen its importance.(Malaby 2007)

That said, player participation in game development could be seen as a kind of open innovation (Banks, 2013; Banks and Humphreys, 2008). While this perspective still explicitly de-emphasizes critical perspectives on the exploitation of player creators (Henry Jenkins and Banks 2014) it motivates this choice with a number of points about player labour in games:

(1) player creators enter freely into the relationship with the game company with the understanding that they will work for free;

(2) there is a mutual benefit as a result of the collaboration of players and the development company;

(3) players enjoy their co-creative activities.

While Banks (2017) has recently adopted a more critical perspective that is making a strong argument for creative justice in the sense of doing justice to those who actually create something and giving credit, it still makes sense to use his formulation of the arguments above here because they are the most nuanced version of this point while still reflecting a position that would not speak of an exploitation of player creators. These arguments as presented here do in fact make a powerful point: If players enter freely and knowingly into unpaid labour and are not forced in any way then it becomes

difficult to call this exploitation. If players earn other kinds of rewards that might even be turned into capital like work prospects and valuable experiences that can help to obtain a professional position, then that could be an acceptable outcome.

However, on the other hand there are recent critical perspectives from media studies that could be a more apt description of these cases. Player co-creation could be described as "hope labour" (Kuehn and Corrigan 2013) where the possibility of future earnings is motivating free work and a kind of self-exploitation where the worker is carrying all the risk of the content production while the digital media platform carries very little risk but stands to gain. (Srnicek 2016) Another frame could be "aspirational labour" (Duffy 2016, 2017) which similarly characterizes work by aspirations for future earnings or positions which are insecure and elusive and are connected to discrimination along the lines of gender and potentially other categories. Here political participation as a theoretical frame can be useful because it focusses its analysis on the power relationship between the different stakeholders of a process.

Participation and Power

While political participation with its focus on power (Arnstein, 1969) is not the only way in which participation in cultural production is understood, it is one of the central ways.(Jenkins 2006, 2012; Jenkins and Carpentier 2013) Jenkins & Carpentier (2013) make this point explicitly in a conversation about participation and politics and stress the need for focusing on power relations in both the understanding of what constitutes participation on a theoretical level and efforts of political and societal change. In this conversation (Jenkins & Carpentier, 2013) Carpentier argues, based on Pateman´s, (1970) definition of full participation for a more limited use of the term "participation" where it only refers to "processes with equal power relations in decision-making" (Jenkins & Carpentier, 2013:271) and he offers the term "interaction" for collaborative processes with uneven power relations. This definition of political participation as based on the power relationship of the stakeholders is related to the concept of agonistic pluralism. (Mouffe, 2013) Agonistic pluralism has been formulated as an alternative aim for a democratic society. Instead of trying to reach a consensus, a democratic society that aims for agonistic pluralism will attempt to create an arena for fair and respectful, violence-free, struggle. Here participation is characterized by a struggle between equals. The overpowering of a party who has no standing or power to enforce their interest in a given process is not agonistic pluralism and not real participation. Struggle has previously been used as a frame for analyzing player participation in high-end gaming that focused on the impact of productive play and on defining the rules of competition.(Prax 2018) A downside of this perspective on participation in cultural production is that it, as a part of the definition of participation, includes a normative point about how culture is supposed to be produced. It is not obvious that cultural production is or should aspire to be a process with a power distribution that is measured by a framework that has been developed for analyzing democratic processes. That said, this paper is aiming to give an honest representation to the perspectives of, for example Jenkins and Banks (2014), and it is trying to make a contribution to the discussion as it exists today.

As a way of developing an understanding of power relations in participation processes Jenkins calls for more research of these processes on a level between micro analysis of decisions on the one hand and macro-analysis of politics on the other. (Jenkins & Carpentier, 2013:274)The analysis of the case of player participation in this paper is intended to follow this call and will then also discuss the relationship between the power positions of participants and the arguments for the acceptability of unpaid player labor that are characterized as "hope labour" (Kuehn and Corrigan 2013) and aspirational labour .(Duffy 2016, 2017) From a theoretical perspective, this means that the analysis will loosely use the new theoretical model of participation by Carpentier

(2016a) which dedicates 4 out of 12 steps of analysis to the power relationship between the different actors but which is designed for a more micro reading of a participation process and also has an added step for a normative analysis. Carpentier's (2016a) analysis steps which focus on power in the participation process are:

1. Analyze the power position of each actor in each decision-making moment. (Question: Who decides on what?)

2. Compare the power position the actors in each decision-making moment. (Question: How equal are the power relations in the decision-making moment?)

3. Compare the power positions the actors in the entire process. (Question: How equal are the power relations in general?)

4. Evaluate the (un)balanced nature of the power position of privileged and non-privileged actors

METHOD

The paper takes a perspective between micro and macro analysis and looks at the process of the involvement of player creators in the design of the infrastructure of future player modifications of the game. The method of data collection and analysis reflects the aim of offering a perspective on how the power dynamics work while not focusing on a single moment of a participatory process. The contrast between the impact on the design and the power dynamic in the creation process can be provided by an outside perspective on the outcome of the process together with the perspective of an insider and participant in the process. This perspective on the outcome, taken from previous literature, will be contextualized with the help of critical play (Konzack 2002) and play experience (Aarseth 2003; Mäyrä 2008) on the side of the author. The author has been an avid player of WoW at the time in question and has the background knowledge to understand the relevance of the outcome of the participatory process. Without a detailed understanding of WoW and add-ons from both play and previous research it would have been impossible to fully understand the role of the player creators in the creation of the Application Programming Interface (hereafter API) and even knowing what to ask in the interview requires an in-depth understanding of the game. While this paper is not focused on the interface modifications by players but instead on the process of co-creation it is still important to mention that the author has in previous studies been conducting an Interface Study (Consalvo and Dutton 2006) of WoW which enables contextualization of interface development. This insight is also necessary because this involvement of players in the creation of WoW had been kept a secret by Blizzard as the company initially required the player creators to sign an NDA which has since been lifted. This means that there is no threat of legal repercussions hanging over the interviewees any longer. That said, one player creator was still reluctant to discuss this topic due to insecurity about the legal situation and worries about informal consequences. While the other two interviewees did not share these concerns, this paper will only reveal the identity of one of the interviewees whose role in the participatory process is central for the analysis, André "Cide" Ericsson, one of the creators of CTMod.

The interviewees are two player creators with central roles in the WoW add-on community and a community manager and liaison between Blizzard and the add-on community. Two of these interviewees have been a part of a previous research project. The interviews were conducted as what can be called "focused semi-structured interviews" (Minichiello, Aroni, and Hays 2008; Minichiello, Aroni, and Minichiello 1990) or "unstructured interviewing" (Frey & Fontana, 2005:705) to allow the

interviewees to tell their stories and give their perspective while still maintaining a topic. This openness is the reason why the participatory process analyzed in this paper has been discovered in the first place as one of the interviewees mentioned it as something that might be relevant. It had been impossible to ask for information about it because, as mentioned above, this information had been largely kept secret. The interview with Cide has been adapted based on the information from the first interviews and focused on the participatory creation of the API and Cide's perspective on the power relationship in the process.

The content of the interview has been partially transcribed and thematically coded (Braun *et al*. 2012) where over-arching analytical categories drawn from the data will be combined with relevant theory from the theoretical framework (Bryman, 2003) according to the questions provided by Carpentier's (2016a) analysis steps focused on power in the participation process mentioned above.

This paper uses a case study in which player creators had full control over the design and implementation of a feature of the game while being disempowered in the process of the participation in relation to the game company. This case has specifically been chosen as a critical case. This means that it needs to have special relevance for a specific field. (Flyvbjerg and Bryant, 2003) Here this case is used to high-light the considerable power difference between player creators and game producers. This case is chosen to highlight the importance of a critical perspective on power because ignoring it means that one runs the risk of missing cases such as this one. With an eye towards the logics of platform capitalism, hope labour, and aspirational labour it is becoming more important to be focus on the extend of these power differences. Finally, this is a case that the producers of the game, Blizzard Entertainment, purposefully kept secret which only serves to highlight the importance of examining it.

DESCRIPTION OF THE CASE

WoW allows player creators to modify the interface of the game via add-ons, programs written in the scripting language "LUA", that are mounted on top of the games API and change the way data is presented to players. (Prax 2012) Or at least that is what add-ons are doing now. Before the first expansion for WoW was published, add-ons had the possibilities to do more than presenting data. The API was open for modifications that automatized certain parts of play and trivialized decision-making and game play challenges. During the preparation of the expansion Blizzard decided to limit the possibilities of add-ons to automatize play, take decisions, and do things by themselves. Blizzard originally planned to remove the API completely in order to regain full control over the game. However, they did invite feedback from add-on developers who had been in contact with employees of Blizzard working on the interface already and who had made add-ons that made a central contribution to the game and co-created the game design of WoW. One of these add-on authors was Cide, at the time a young adult male living in Sweden. Cide was one of the two authors of CTMod. CTMod was one of the most influential add-ons in the early years of World of Warcraft and had considerable influence on the game, making raiding, which was the dominant play style at max level, viable. (Chen 2008; Taylor 2006b)

The success of the add-on led to the invitation of its creators (as well as of a number of other player creators) to contribute to the development of the API for add-on development in World of Warcraft. These player creators worked for Blizzard to re-shape the environment for creating add-ons. Their aim here was to keep information available to add-ons while following the requirements of Blizzard to remove any kind of automated play and decision-making possibilities from them. The player creators invented and created a framework in which certain functions that were central for automation of play could not be called by add-ons any longer and in which add-ons

could not take automated actions any longer but could still gather information about the game state and present it in sophisticated ways which is what they are doing today. The members of the add-on author got rewarded for their effort with a coupon for the subscription fee for WoW for three years and had to sign NDAs (non-disclosure-agreements) in order to keep their involvement in the creation and design of the game a secret. This example is a case in which a game company did not only adapt player creations into their game but instead included player creators, in a way, into their work force. It is also a case in which player creators were in the position to define the possibilities of future player participation. The add-on author team was given direct access to not only the infra-structure of the API but also the future design of the participation process.

This example for high participation intensity has however been contrasted by the disempowered position of the player creators in this process, the meager material reward for their work, and the limited recognition of authorship and even secrecy around the player involvement in the creation of the game.

ANALYSIS

Carpentier`s (2016a) model for the analysis of the power relationship of participants is structuring this analysis. Here are the steps again for the convenience of the reader:

1. Analyze the power position of each actor in each decision-making moment. (Question: Who decides on what?)

2. Compare the power position the actors in each decision-making moment. (Question: How equal are the power relations in the decision-making moment?)

3. Compare the power positions the actors in the entire process. (Question: How equal are the power relations in general?)

4. Evaluate the (un)balanced nature of the power position of privileged and non-privileged actors

Who decides on what?

The first step requires the analysis of the power position of each actor in each decision-making moment. In detail, this step asks for generative power, restrictive power, and resistance. The guiding question here is: Who decides on what? In this case the generative power of the players lies in the creation of a system that allows add-ons within certain limits as a part of the API. The player creators proposed, designed, and implemented this system. Blizzard's role here is mostly related to restrictive power. While Blizzard does have the possibility to make something else than what the player creators proposed in this case, they used their control over the API and technological infrastructure to restrict the possibilities of player-creators. In this case the player creators have full generative power while Blizzard has full restrictive power. The player creators could at best have refused to work for free which would have jeopardized the future of their previous work on add-ons. In the framework of this analytical tool the possibility of refusing free work can be understood as resistance. Blizzard profited from add-ons and they had become an integral part of the very design of the game, CTMod being a good example for this. As a result, Blizzard had to consider the reactions of millions of players in case that their valued add-ons disappeared, and the game got worse (or less playable). This means that ultimately the power of resistance that empowered player creators at least in some way was derived from the consumer power of the players who are using add-ons and who pay Blizzard and could take their business elsewhere. The add-on authors did not even have the

power to retract their add-ons necessarily because they could not be retracted after they had been published and distributed. Add-on authors could at best threaten to stop maintaining an add-on which also meant disappointing their fellow players and friends.

How equal are the power relations in the decision-making moment?

The next step is the comparison of the power positions of the actors in each decision-making moment. The associated question is: How equal are the power relations in the decision-making moment? The central decision-making moment of this case is when Blizzard accepts the proposal of the player creators for the new API system for managing add-ons. In this situation, the generative power lies with the player creators while the full restrictive power is on the side of Blizzard. However, at the point where decisions are taken on the design of the future API infrastructure the players do have some power position. While Blizzard decides over the general properties of the infra-structure (e.g. it must not permit automated actions but only present information) the player creators have the freedom to create a system inside these limitations.

How equal are the power relations in general?

When comparing the power positions of the actors in the entire process for the next step in the analytic model (the question is: How equal are the power relations in general?) the picture is somewhat more nuanced because of the influence of player creators over the proxy of the millions of players who use their add-ons. Outside of the control and limitation of the API, Blizzard cannot influence the add-on scene. This means that while Blizzard has the technical possibility to fully control add-ons, using this power might result in fallout, dissatisfied players, and less income from sales and subscription fees. The power that the add-on authors could have used was that with their add-ons gone some players would have enjoyed the game less and would have stopped playing and paying. The same mechanism is at work for the other factor that makes it difficult for Blizzard to manage individual add-ons, the technical limitations of the API. Shutting down a part do the API infra-structure that the target add-on relies on could also disable other add-ons that use the very same infrastructure. This architecture of the API denies clean management of add-ons from Blizzard.

However, this does not mean that the power relation is equal. While the player creators potentially have the influence of the players on their side, Blizzard as a major corporation in the sector of cultural creation can just remove the possibility for add-ons altogether and then weather the storm of player feedback or include add-on functionality into their game themselves as they anyways do regularly.(Prax, 2012) Blizzard can use and has used the threat of legal actions against players and player creators who attempt to contest its sole control over WoW. (Kow and Nardi, 2010) In a paper about a conflict around the possibility of add-on authors soliciting donations from users of their add-ons in-game Know and Nardi (2010) document that Blizzard went so far as to wipe any trace of the presence of the player creators they were in conflict with from their official forums. This included add-on authors who had compiled guidelines on add-on programming that were so useful to the community that they had been awarded the title of “Most Valuable Poster” (MVP) on the Blizzard forums. This means that there are documented cases of Blizzard making full use of their control over a platform like the official forums to enforce their interest even if this led to fallout or treated former allies harshly.

On a level of cultural capital, the player creators involved in the creation of the API had to bend to Blizzards will. While they were mentioned in the credits of the game the players had to sign NDA agreements which limited their authorship claims by keeping the extent of their involvement secret. The player creators did also leave another trace of their authorship inside the code of the interface. This mark of authorship in a hidden place reminds of the Easter egg in the game Adventure (Atari, 1979) in which the

designer of the game, Warren Robinett, in an act of resistance against Atari's policy of not crediting game designers hid his name in the game for players to find and in doing so created the first Easter eggs in digital games. This example also shows that the power relation between player creators as participants and the game development company is highly unequal and that this power difference shapes the relationship and process heavily. The player creators choose to hide their names in the code of the game because they had no way to defend their interests or claim credit for their creation openly against Blizzard. The player creators were also not paid for their contribution. While they did receive a game card for three years of WoW and a signed copy of the next expansion of the game, these tokens are no replacement for the remuneration specialized and successful programmers should be able to expect for their work.

The only sources of influence on the side of the player creators come from the consumer influence of players by proxy as the players might stop paying if their favorite add-ons are disabled. Besides this source of influence, player creators must rely on resistance techniques like Easter eggs in the face of technical, financial, and legal power.

Evaluation of the (un)balanced nature of the power position

This also marks Blizzard as the privileged actor for the next analysis step that calls for the evaluation of the (un)balanced nature of the power position of privileged and non-privileged actors. The privileged actor, Blizzard, has a complete restrictive power in this case and while the player creators did manage to influence the policy and create the system of Blizzards that governed future add-ons' capabilities, it is important to remember also that the interests of Blizzard and the player creators are not at odds here. If they were then this process could have led to a much less balanced result. (Kow and Nardi 2010b)

Cide specifically was still somewhat young and looking back now with his experience as an industry professional in the IT business, he states that while he did not regret the participation in the team, he was indeed exploited. He needed to participate in order to protect his earlier work in creating add-ons which could have ended up broken by Blizzard. The decision to participate was not freely taken but there was an element of coercion. This shows another dimension of aspirational labour (Duffy 2017) which is already a critical of the self-exploitation of workers who love their work. Here Blizzard was implicitly keeping the creations and labour of the add-on authors (as well as the social and cultural capital connected to those creations) hostage. The point here is not that it is Blizzards responsibility that players made add-ons in the first place, but this serves to highlight that the decision of add-on authors to work for free was not entirely freely taken, something that needs to be considered. On a more general level it could be said that player creators who love their creations but who do not have the power to keep them safe and rely on the mercy of others are even more vulnerable to exploitation. This is a powerful counterargument to the argument that player-creators love their work as a justification of the exploitation of free player labour. The love of player-creators for their work can just as well serve to compromise their power position in the process an weaken their negotiation.

Instead of striving towards maximizing participation, Blizzard worked to minimize it and to keep it secret. This means the justification of free player labour as hope labour (Kuehn and Corrigan 2013) becomes somewhat cynical. Framing it is hope labour does not make sense if the player involvement and its considerable extent is kept a secret so that they cannot use it as work experience after all. So even this very modest frame of defending unpaid labour is not applicable in this case. On a more general level it can be attested that without the agonistic power on the side of the participants it is possible for the empowered party to take away the hope from hope labour. This is especially vexing as there seems to be little reason to not name player creators who participate in

this way in making the game or even showcasing this as a positive case of working with the community.

This is a case of participatory creation of culture where participants did have a considerable influence on the outcome of the production but had nearly no power over the process in which they were working. They did have influence only within the limits of the development companies´ control over technology and possibly the extended customer power of the players who used their add-ons. The player creators have no way of actively harnessing that customer power though. Payment and ownership, while required to not have material exploitation of unpaid labour, would not have been necessary for a full agonistic participatory process. Instead of publishing the role and impact of player participants Blizzard purposefully restricted the power of the player participants here through the reduction of cultural, social, and financial capital, a limitation of authorship, and threats of legal actions or the removal of the API.

This example shows the importance of including power into the core of any conceptualization of participation in cultural creation. This analysis of the power positions reaffirms that the doing the work one loves is not always a good thing but can weaken one's position and that even the hope in hope labour can be taken away. However, the theoretical frame does at the very least imply a starting point for addressing creative injustice: empowering participants.

DISCUSSION

The discussion section will first examine to what extent the analysis of this case study could be valid for other spaces and then it will propose starting points for empowering player creators.

While this case has specifically been chosen because it represents an extreme in terms of how far the impact of player creators goes it is possible to point towards some areas where the findings here could be relevant. Cultural production, especially with digital media technologies, often mirrors these kinds of power distributions where potential participants are disempowered and where there is no agonistic pluralism. The position of player creators who are making item designs for sale on Steam, esports athletes who are creating content on the platform of the game they are competing in, or streamers on Twitch are in potentially similar situations. Social media platforms more generally share a power distribution where the users and creators are contributing most if not all of the content but have little impact on the platform. While Twitch does have differences from other platform, for example the focus on life participation instead of the production of content for later consumption, (Deng et al. 2015) this is also a space where cultural creators have to bend to the logics of platform capitalism. (Srnicek 2016) Twitch streamers have little impact on the design of the platform and artists who create items for DotA have to accept updates to Steam´s payment system for user-created content or walk, all despite the considerable impact and even reliance of the platforms on content creators. Also, here there is little power on the side of the player creators other than the customer power of their fans and informed players that they might be able to use by proxy. So, what can be done in this situation?

The first point that needs to be made here is that the business that control the platforms, in this case study Blizzard, could without any considerable financial consequences recognized the players´ contributions. Blizzard could even have paid the player creators. That said, there is no sign that the industry is developing guidelines for treating player creators fairly. This is not surprising, since it is against the nature of capitalist business to reduce exploitation intensity if there is any other choice. That said, there is currently a growing worker movement in the games industry. The high level of exploitation of employed workers inside the games industry in connection lay-offs in a

year of record profits, studio closings that have been kept secret from the workers until the last second, firing a female worker over a tweet, and forced arbitration of sexual harassment, are only the most recent entries on a long list. The efforts building towards unionization in the US for example are however excluding player laborers and creators who are not formal employees of game companies. Unionization as an approach is very much oriented towards re-distributing power in the development of games and towards creating agonistic pluralism and this case has shown that player labourers are in terms of the work they can be doing and the contribution to the game they are making indistinguishable from formally employed game workers. However, it is important to also remember those who are the most disempowered in this process and while there is something to be said for the strategy of working with formal employees first, we must not leave those who are the most disempowered out in the cold.

The analysis of the power situation does however lend itself for recommending organized action from players. By showing that the add-on authors are in a situation where they can be coerced to work for free and where the only power they have is the customer power from the players who use their add-ons it highlights the importance of players. Informed players, who understand the involvement of player creators and see games as participatory and co-authored, could mount a conscious effort and support the player laborers who make the content they enjoy. While this would be an extension of customer power instead of democratic citizen-power it does speak for the pragmatism of the notions of political participation and agonistic plurality that customer power would still be a valid means of empowering player creators. While there has been collective action of players in relation to actions of game companies are not used to acting collectively, even when the property rights to their purchased games are taken away. They need to be educated. Something that could lead to such education would be rising issues in relation to new kinds of co-created content that are becoming more central to today's culture: streaming and esports. These are both co-creative in a similar manner as game design, but here the player creators, the streamers and esports stars, are so much more visible and vocal than the niche group of modders and player creators. The struggle about who owns streaming or esports content is going on right now. The interests of the streamers, player creators, esports athletes and esports audiences are all aligned with the rights of co-creators of this culture.

CONCLUSION

The perspective on player labour that this article set out to critically discuss was that use of free labour of player creators was not exploitation because:

(1) player creators enter freely into the relationship with the game company with the understanding that they will work for free;

(2) there is a mutual benefit as a result of the collaboration of players and the development company;

(3) players enjoy their co-creative activities.

In conclusion it can be said that none of these reasons justifies a kind of player participation in which the participants are disempowered and not able to defend their interests. The notions of political participation and agonistic pluralism that have been used in the analysis of the power relationship between player creators and the game development company have shown to be highly relevant for the discussion around unpaid player labour also in the light of mentioned justifications. While it is not speaking to clearly to the point of the enjoyment of labour it does show that the game producers do have enough power to force player creators into NDAs which are explicitly designed to keep their involvement in the creation of the game a secret and

as a consequence make it more difficult for the players to use their participation for getting a paid job. In this case it is even somewhat besides to the point to talk about hope labour because the company that is controlling the participatory process has enough power to purposefully remove the hope of the player participants to be able to turn their participation into an income in turn relegating the aspirations of the players to the sidelines. Further this example shows that players do not necessarily freely consent into entering in a relationship where they provide free labour. The possibility (and in this case actual threat) of the game producer removing the creations of the player co-creators means that there are situations in which the previous work of player creators can be held hostage by the game producers. This means that game producers have the power to take away the role of player creators in the community, their cultural and social capital, and even their actual creations. This highlights that affective labour can weaken the power position of a creator and even stand in the way of full participation and agonistic plurality when beloved creation or culture can be used as a kind of hostage. This is also a point where the relationship of gamer producers to player creators is quite like that of other owners of platforms for cultural creation like social media platforms. This also means that it can be argued that they deserve the same level of critical analysis investigation as these platforms.

It needs to be stated again that this would not have needed to be the setup for the way in which power was distributed in this process. It would have been possible to allow players to share their participation in the creation of the game openly. That said, some of the elements of this process are less malleable. The development company has the control over the technological infrastructure of the game and outside of offering alternative versions of the game will automatically end up in a situation where it in some way must take the decision over what happens to player modifications as the game design team moves forward and changes the game. This means that even outside of this case where the player creators where minors it is difficult to imagine a setup that allows player creators to maintain control over their contributions. However, this problem serves as another highlight of the fact that a perspective which is sensible to power is required when trying to not only understand but also to manage and plan for participatory creation of culture.

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