

Minecraft as a Platform for Crafting Value

User-Generated Content (UGC) is a vital part of the gaming industry, which is both well-received by the players and strongly supported by game developers. Instances of UGC activities can be found in many different forms, ranging from in-game means of generating content (such as map tools in strategy games), to alterations to the original game (a practice that is commonly known as "modding").

In parallel to these activities, there is a new direction of the UGC practices in the gaming industry that slightly diverges from the aforementioned ones: games that base their experience in generating, distributing, and consuming content [6-8]. These games, such as Minecraft¹ and LittleBigPlanet² (LBP), provide the affordances of achieving all these practices, either as an internal function of the game (as is the case in LBP), or as a combination of both internal and external activities to the game (in Minecraft).

In both cases, UGC becomes a powerful tool for disseminating ideas and values, as it acts as the means of communication between the players. Following Gee's [4] framework of critical discourse analysis, language is inherently political and its modalities vary from textual or verbal speech, to imagery, clothing, gestures, and music. Recognising, interpreting and understanding the expression of these modalities of language depends on the knowledge of the idiosyncrasy and the characteristics of the context in which they are expressed [3]. As such, meaning can be conveyed not only through what players (and in this case members of the communities that revolve around the aforementioned games) say, but also through what players create, share, and consume.

Research has already pinpointed to the diversity of experiences that can come out of games that have creative elements incorporated into them. Duncan [2], for instance, elaborates on the emergent nature of play in Minecraft by looking into the learning potential that is involved in the game, as well as the experimentation with more abstract ideas, such as a religious mini-game that was created by Jason Rohrer³. In this particular mini-game, a Minecraft world, installed onto a USB-stick, was progressively passed on from one player to the next, each of whom had to play the game until her/his virtual death. As the game world was passed from player to player, each of them left their own personal touch on it, and each successive player was able to experience what the previous players had collectively created. The whole concept behind the mini-game was that every single player had to inhabit a world that was created by someone else, who had the role of God in it.

Along the same lines, Pearce has pointed out the productive nature of play in the virtual environment "There," as experienced through her ethnographic work in it [5]. The three types of productivity she identifies are: coming up with new cultural practices in the context of the game, reiterating and reimagining cultural artefacts from other contexts into the context of There, and creating entirely new environments for play by amalgamating elements from both There and other virtual worlds. All these practices are evident in Minecraft too, showcasing the power players have in their hands in terms of generating, appropriating and reimagining existing cultural artefacts in the game.

Thus, Minecraft becomes a flexible platform for both creating and disseminating a large variety of creations, which becomes even larger and more diverse through the modding capabilities that the game offers [1]. Although many of these creations are only simple constructions without any cultural or political extension, in many cases Minecraft players try to convey their feelings, preferences, and even art through them, by memorialising their beloved ones⁴, recreating artefacts from their favourite TV shows⁵, or reimagining pieces of art⁶. This opens up the question of what else is potentially achievable through UGC in games. Do games such as Minecraft act as platforms for self-expression, through which cultural values are constructed and conveyed to the community?

It is one of the main questions that drive my ethnographic studies of Minecraft. Preliminary observations and interviews of the work of three teams has shown that there is much more to the creation of a build than that meets the eye. The members of the teams I am following acquire inspiration from many different sources (such as real-world history and architecture) and re-appropriate it in the digital world of the game. In many

¹ <https://minecraft.net/>

² <http://littlebigplanet.playstation.com/>

³ http://www.wired.com/2011/07/mf_chainworld/

⁴ <http://digg.com/video/chikii-minecraft-memorial>

⁵ <http://kotaku.com/holy-cow-its-star-treks-uss-voyager-recreated-in-mi-1254253961>

⁶ <http://www.tate.org.uk/about/projects/tate-worlds-art-reimagined-minecraft>

cases, their creations are followed by concept art that represents what the final build will be like, faux-history that contextualises the build, composing music that will match the aesthetics of the build, capturing screenshots that are depicting the extent and the beauty of the outcome, as well as recording videos that will present it in an appropriate manner.

What drives these creative practices though is not the replication of already existent items, but originality. Experienced or professional players, as the ones that I am observing, aim at producing pieces of Minecraft work that stand out from the rest and also contribute to the existing repository of builds for the game. They are also interested in pushing the limits of the game even further, by adopting existing building styles and experimenting with them in order to come up with new ways of creating content in the game. The game is composed of blocks and as such it is relatively easy to construct square buildings. The leap from these kinds of builds to originality is happening when the players begin to perceive the game as a design tool and use the square blocks to create organically shaped builds of any form, such as humans, waves, flora, fauna, and anything that deviates from plain square buildings and constructs.

For these players, Minecraft is transformed from a game to a computer-aided design tool that facilitates self-expression and as such is used in creating pieces of art that bear cultural value.

References

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