Spinning Fans: Game Producers and Online Participatory Culture

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MMEDIA 3E03: Interactive Digital Culture

November 29, 2004

In *The Prince,* Machiavelli wrote "Whosoever desires constant success must change his conduct with the times" (Machiavelli, 74). We are in the midst of a paradigm shift. The corporate entities that develop, produce and distribute cultural products are attempting to adapt to new technology – and to the fans that are using it – that "represent a potential loss of control over their intellectual property" (Jenkins, *Interactive).* One of the most publicized struggles of this type surrounds the Recording Industry Association of America. The RIAA has taken legal action against online file sharing with both the companies developing and maintaining peer-to-peer sharing applications, and the individuals who use them. (Hartery). In the case of the RIAA, the circumstances are easily boiled down to an obvious infraction – people are obtaining and distributing copyrighted material without paying for the right to do so. But what about issues of intellectual property within participatory culture, where the circumstances are not so cut and dry? As Jenkins points out, "fans actively assert their mastery over the mass-produced texts which provide the raw materials for their own cultural productions and the basis for their social interactions" (Jenkins, *Television,* 508). Participatory culture blurs the line between producer and consumer. The issue of intellectual property and possession over these secondary cultural products is also blurred. Game developers are currently employing strategies to deal with issues of intellectual property within the participatory culture that surrounds their products, in order to protect their profits, and even benefit from the efforts of the participatory culture. To benefit from the fan culture, game developers must first understand how fans interact with their cultural products.

Fans do not consume cultural products passively. Jenkins views fans as "active producers and manipulators of meaning…who appropriate popular texts and reread them in a fashion that serves different interests" (Jenkins, *Television,* 508). They are motivated to reinterpret and recreate existing cultural meanings because of a dichotomy that arises when they attempt to view the products solely from the vantage point of the original author. Game fans are fascinated by the games they adore, but they are also frustrated with the "popular narratives [that] often fail to satisfy… unrealized possibilities within the original works" (Jenkins, *Television,* 508). Their initial fascination, combined with this frustration, inspires them to 'salvage' the original products for their own interests, in the form of secondary cultural products derived from the original work. Fan cultures exist because of the natural tendency for fans to seek out and interact with other people who share common interests. The construction, circulation, and reinterpretation of cultural products and meanings establish a community in which fans are active participants.

Participatory culture is a network of subcultures. Often, fans are interested in more than one game, show or other media product. Fans in one game subculture might use metaphors and references from another game, or from another game culture. Jenkins refers to such intertextual connections across a range of media texts as 'Nomadic Reading' (Jenkins, *Television,* 513). Active readers are not limited to one source in their interpretations of a text. They are free to draw their inspiration from many games, popular culture, and other stories. Their ideas enter into the recursive environment of participatory culture, where those ideas are shared and reshaped through ongoing discussions with other fans. A good example of this is the 'Sims Survivor' concept that many *Sims* fans are participating in. This scenario places the narrative structure of the popular television show *Survivor* into the context of *The Sims.* The fans recreate characters and requisite plot schemes reminiscent of the television program in the game environment. Screen shots of the in-game recreation are used along with fan-written narratives to produce web sites displaying the fans' productions. Often, they are set up in such a way that the narrative unfolds over time, allowing the fan to add weekly episodes, and generate feedback from other fans. What is most significant about the 'Sims Survivor' phenomenon is that there are many different fans producing different versions, or interpretations of the concept. Some are focused on the scheming and intrigue of the *Survivor* program. Others emphasize violence, sexuality, or comedy in their interpretation. "Fans, like other consumers of popular culture, read intertextually as well as textually and their pleasure comes through the particular juxtapositions that they can create between specific program content and other cultural materials" (Jenkins, *Television,* 514). The intertextuality and reinterpretation of cultural products is what has traditionally threatened corporate media producers. They want to retain control over their own creative freedom, to protect the profitability and the 'popular interpretation' of their cultural product.

Jenkins' discussion of fan interaction with cultural products introduces de Certeau's notion of 'textual poaching', the "ongoing struggle for possession of the text and for control over its meanings" between readers and writers (Jenkins, *Television,* 508). In this struggle, a power hierarchy is set up. The author is the dominant class, and the reader is supposed to serve as a passive recipient of authorial meaning. This traditional hierarchy reinforces the original, intended meaning put forth by the author, and marginalizes different interpretations. Many authors engage in this struggle because they do not want readers to reinvent their products. They worry that some of the derivative cultural products will tarnish the reputation or morals attached to their creation, and will inhibit their ability to "negotiate for a larger audience" (Jenkins, *Television,* 509-510). However, from the viewpoint of the fan community, attempts by the author to exert control

are seen as "unwarranted interference in their own creative activity" (Jenkins, *Television,* 511). They feel that the ways in which readers opt to interpret a cultural product, or how interpretations are discussed and circulated in fan communities should not be included in the property rights that authors have over their products. "Fans' mental play is no business of producers and neither are their private communications, however lengthy" (Jenkins, *Television*, 512). Participatory culture surrounding *The Sims* games has spawned many creations that the game developers feel are unfit to acknowledge. Sexually explicit, graphic, politically charged or immoral examples of the fan-produced content are largely ignored by the game developers. Although they claim to support and encourage fan participation, they do so only on their own terms. While they support and publicize fan created products that subscribe to the wholesome, family-friendly ideology that they want their site to convey to consumers, they choose to allow 'unfit' productions to continue without any acknowledgment at all. It is worth noting that the game developers do not actively attempt to dismantle these unsavory fan productions, presumably because they consider the online 'hype' that these derivative products create to be free promotion of their product. They could take legal action to have such derivative productions removed, as outlined in *The Sims 2* End User License Agreement (The Sims, *EULA).* By selectively supporting fan production in this way, the developers are shaping the participatory culture and the popular image surrounding their product. On one hand, they are sending a clear message to their fan-producers about the types of production that will be supported and presented on their site, and the ideology that they want their site content to embody. On the other hand, they are appealing to fan producers as tolerant and accepting of oppositional interpretations, allowing these interpretations to exist 'underground.' In this case, it seems that the author has shrewdly subverted the struggle for possession of the text, ensuring that any control surrendered to the reader will return a benefit for the author. In this sense, the game developers are securing their own dominant position in the power hierarchy.

  At the base of this discussion is the concept of hegemony, which Hebdige defines as a situation where "certain social groups can exert 'total social authority' over other subordinate groups not simply by coercion or by the direct imposition of ruling ideas, but by 'winning and shaping consent so that the power of the dominant classes appears both legitimate and natural'" (Hebdige, 661). In a literal sense, many game developers' End User License Agreements (EULAs) reflect Hebdige's definition, by requiring users to consent to conditions granting the game producers exclusive rights over intellectual properties surrounding their products and any secondary products derived from their games, in order to install and use the game software (The Sims, *EULA).* However, in light of the productive nature of fan culture, now armed with the

decentralized and widely distributive structure of the World Wide Web, it is becoming increasingly difficult for game developers to enforce such limitations. "The old rhetoric of opposition and cooptation assumed a world where consumers had little direct power to shape media content and where there were enormous barriers to entry into the marketplace, whereas the new digital environment expands their power to archive, annotate, appropriate, and recirculate media products" (Jenkins, *Interactive).* Hegemony is neither universal nor permanent, and must acknowledge minorities and assign them their place in the dominant ideology. It can be viewed as a 'moving equilibrium' between the assertions of both the dominant and minority groups. "It has to be won, reproduced and sustained. Hegemony… contains relations of forces favourable or unfavourable to this or that tendency' (Hebdige, 661). Many game developers have decided that it is a futile task to attempt to stop all appropriation of their cultural products in fan culture. Instead, they are looking at secondary cultural products and the network of fans involved in their production as tools for their own benefit. *The Sims 2* comes with content development tools that allow users to create new skins, objects and characters. These player-creations provide EA Games with content for their community-driven website. The objects are also available for download, either on *The Sims 2* website which requires the user to have a registered copy of the game to log in, or on a linking external site, 'The Sims Resource.' This site requires users to pay a monthly subscription fee to access the database of player submitted objects. *The Sims* line of games has made a niche for itself, recreating and repackaging their game into numerous iterations. Throughout these iterations, the game itself has changed very little. The game developers successfully reintroduced new versions of their games by offering different objects, skins, and activities to the user. Presumably, many of these ideas had their origins in the fan community that the game developers have come to (very tightly) embrace. Participatory culture provides the game developers with new ideas for future iterations of their games, free publicity and advertising, and an enriched community experience for users outside of the sphere of the game. They have turned a potential threat into a profitable, renewable resource. Moreover, they have done so by "winning and shaping consent so that the power of the dominant classes appears both legitimate and natural." The fans who conceptualize, produce and upload their creations to *The Sims* site do so willingly and happily. The fact that the game developers are profiting from fan-labour seems irrelevant; the fans are glad that there is a framework for community in which they can participate, and feel empowered because their efforts are supported and given public visibility by the game developer.

Instrumental to the development of the current landscape of participatory culture is the digital and connective environment of the Internet. This tool allows an ever-increasingly large group of fans to "accumulate, retain and continually circulate unprecedented amounts of relevant information" (Jenkins, *Interactive*). Fans are able to communicate with each other, and interact with cultural products, with near-immediate response from the rest of the community. The scope of such many-to-many communications spans the connected globe. Fan communities are consistently growing, and reaction time shortens as connectivity speeds increase. The public visibility that fan culture currently enjoys through the World Wide Web makes fan culture a powerful entity that corporate cultural producers must address. Pierre Levy believes that a new 'knowledge space' may emerge from a widespread online participatory culture. This 'knowledge space,' will transform existing structures of knowledge and power. The circulating products become resources for the production of meaning. "The distinctions between authors and readers, producers and spectators, creators and interpretations will blend to form a reading-writing continuum, which will extend from… network designers to the ultimate recipient, each helping to sustain the activities of the others" (Levy, 121). Indicators of such blending are present in the gaming industry. Many game producers are now including features with their games that allow for fan participation and improvisation. The developers are aware of what the fan culture wants, and they are trying to address their needs. They also see the promotional benefits of the circulation of intellectual properties across media outlets, and are content to support (and profit from) these participatory cultures. However, for many developers, the line is clearly drawn at ownership of the cultural products. *The Sims 2* EULA ensures that EA Games retains sole commercial rights over all original game materials and any products created with the content building tools provided with the game. Not all game producers follow the logic that their power is vested in media ownership. Some game developers have opted to follow Levy's utopian view of new power and knowledge structures by handing over ownership of fan-created products to the fans. *Second Life*, an online metaworld, changed its EULA so that players who created content would own their creations, and retain full intellectual property protection for their products. Philip Rosedale, CEO of *Second Life* developer Linden Labs, wrote ""we believe our new policy recognizes the fact that persistent world users are making significant contributions to building these worlds and should be able to both own the content they create and share in the value that is created" (Linden Lab, 2003). They have had very positive results with this strategy. The metaworld has proven to be a profitable business, and Linden Labs is sharing with the player-creators its real world profits. A vibrant community has emerged where content creators and consumers reinforce one another. This

enriched experience attracts more users and also further entrepreneurial developers. Each month *Second Life* users currently buy and sell goods and services valued at over one million dollars (Linden Lab, 2004).

Fans actively interact with cultural products, manipulating and reinterpreting cultural meaning. The intertextual and collaborative approach in which they appropriate cultural products is emphasized and widely circulated through the new media environment. The Internet supports and sustains a range of different cultural and political projects, some overtly oppositional, others more celebratory, yet all reflecting a public desire to participate within, rather than simply consume, media. By embracing and supporting participatory culture surrounding their games, game developers are able to shape the types of cultural productions that are emphasized, and are able to 'spin' the culture into one that benefits their own interests. New strategies are emerging among game developers. These strategies incorporate the fans into their business model as partners, working under the premise that what is profitable for the fans will be profitable for the developers. Perhaps this new inclusive power structure, and Levy's concept of the new 'knowledge space' will be the end result of present corporate cultural producers' attempts to adapt to the latest paradigm shift.

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