COMMUNITY

YOU AND OUR SPACE

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Introduction

YouTube broadcasts itself with Google. Second Life thrives on Your World, Your Imagination™. Spook's MI5 cannot save the United Kingdom without your help. These are three riveting illustrations where digital media is implemented with particular Web-based tools and applications and expertise. In each instance, the users, rather than the host platform, create a vast and rapidly growing community. All the individuals who, like me, maintain and become creative with 5+ social networking profiles such as Ning and Facebook; get involved and add information about live music events happening near me at frēstyl; (still) engage in seeding and peering movies and music 'for free'; share everyday life 24/7 in 140 characters on Twitter; enjoy social media songs like 'A Social Network for Two: A modern love song'; or contribute code to the Ubuntu developer community. You and a huge collective of others have become participants in digital development practices as many start-ups and established firms have embraced in one way or another (or through aggressive merger and acquisition practices like those of Google) some of the unique qualities of certain Internet applications and tools by actively articulating your creative and interpretative endeavors.

The decline of the marginal productivity of the user is clearly illustrated through these examples. Facilitated by user-friendly and attractively priced (or gratis) software technologies, emerging sites for user participation are "all forms of digital culture, networked in technology […] and collaborative in principle."[1] This 'participatory turn'[2] is viewed as new or alternative logics that favor new over old production-consumption configurations that, to some degree, assume that user participation (with particular attention to creative and collaborative practices on open and transparent, often corporate media owned platforms) are empowering and are the way of the future. And, while some critical voices can be heard[3], others hail it as the way forward to sustain growth and innovation in society.

With this proliferation of digital technologies, rigid production boundaries have become increasingly porous as a growing number of users participate in copying, cutting, pasting and adding to existing media materials. Users engage in the production of meaning, whether of cultural texts, corporate intentions, or the technology itself. In many cases, participatory Web sites illustrate a rapidly evolving (yet often subtle) relationship of collaboration with users across previously existent production boundaries at a time where it has become "increasingly clear that the Internet is not only embedded in people's lives but that with the rise of a more "participative web" its impacts on all aspects of economic and social organization are expanding"[4]. This participatory phenomenon coincides with a strong interest in and awareness of the importance of corporate media owned platforms engaging with these active users.

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1   Uricchio (2004: 86).
2   See OECD (2007).
3   See, for example, Keen (2007); Woolgar (2002); van Dijck and Nieborg (2009).
4   OECD (2007: 15).

My interest in commercial media culture dates back to the late-1990's, when I conducted research in Hollywood to investigate how the film actor became textually and culturally produced and constructed into a celebrity brand in an effort to enhance our understanding of "bankability" in the movie industry. This integrative approach to examine corporate and consumer interests in the production of both meanings and texts signalled, what has been termed, a participatory culture[5] and pointed to a dynamic relationship between the strategic arrangements of the roles of the media company and the user base, underpinning the development of branded goods and services.

This work fostered my later investigation of iterative media producer-user interactions with particular attention to the ways the media companies develop user participation into a market and the ways in which that market then enables and facilitates particular modes of user development. These sites then become sites of iterative feedback and learning for the media companies. In this paper, I draw on this background to identify how user participation is developed and maintained in the commercial context of a corporate media-based platform and how the user contributions relevant to their participatory experiences may benefit the company and the user communities themselves.

@The Intersection of Commerce + Community

With the availability of affordable and accessible tools for content production and distribution, the rapidly evolving trend of user participation in the production and dissemination of intangible products and services is emerging as a creative infrastructure that is associated with pervasive knowledge-intensive and information-rich user-created content activities. An important thread in discussions concerns the dynamics of user participation as a significant aspect of the knowledge-based economy.[6] It emphasizes the prominent role of information/knowledge and the use of digital information and communication technologies associated with new opportunities for user participation in digital content development.

Media companies are firmly tracking these activities in order to identify the consequences for and impact on commercial interests. In particular, companies have aimed to use and leverage some of the (emergent) unique qualities of user participation centered on branded digital goods and services, linking consumers directly into the production and distribution of products and services or commercial communications – e.g., advertising, reputation building – in order to build brand loyalty and increase revenues.

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5   See Jenkins (1992, 2006).
6   See OECD (2005); United Nations (2008).

What defines a brand?

Experts seem to come up with their own definitions of the term 'brand.'. As a result, somewhat different understandings can be detected. Four perspectives, however, can be identified to characterize our general understanding of brands - the product, the identity, the relationship, and the cultural perspective[7]:

The product perspective: Under this perspective, the brand is 'filled' with meaning by the marketer so as to add value and reinforcing costumer loyalty, while facilitating the consumer decision-making process and purchasing behavior. The role of the brand is to position the product in the mind of the consumer by adding a name, a set of signs and designs to the product or service.

The identity perspective: In this view, the brand is defined as organization, product, symbol and personality. This identity then builds on the product view by adding a brand approach that is instrumental to competitive advantage and profitability.

The relationship perspective: If brands can have identities, then the logic of the relationship perspective reflects a focus on adding and delivering value to consumers based on relationships developing between personified brands and consumers. Many forms exist of consumer-brand relationships akin to relationship partner qualities[8] - similar to our everyday life partnerships. For a variety of reasons, these relationships can also fall apart.

The cultural perspective: Finally, the brand is conceptualized as a cultural symbol. In this area of analysis, the collective of consumers rather than the individual highlights the brand as a social link.

In blending insights from these perspectives together, we can return to the question of how a brand can be defined within the confines of this C3 Research Memo. The brand can be understood as a process that is evoked in a context and organization of contributors, knowledge, networks and technologies emphasizing social ties and experiences among customers that evolve around a brand designed to acquire, engage and retain customers. Some consumers have a desire to deepen their interest in branded goods or services, and form, develop and maintain communities in the pursuit of a shared enterprise, which is captured by the conceptualization of the 'brand community'.[9] The brand community then typically operates in a complex borderland joining established markets and participatory or social networks (associated with participatory cultures) together.[10]

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7   See Esmann Andersen (2006); cf. Kapferer (2008).
8   See Fournier (1998).
9   See Muniz and O'Guinn (2001).
10   See Potts, Cunningham, Hartley, and Ormerod (2008).

In this capacity as 'brand network', opportunities for innovation and learning across rigid boundaries potentially benefit the growth of the media platform. It gives particular attention to (emergent) markets that are demand-driven. Rather than a linear or causal 'chain' of production associated with a supply-driven approach, the brand network is viewed as a dynamic underpinned by a (relatively) open system where everybody (companies and individuals) come up with ideas which may be taken up and dispersed into the network of media properties and retained by commerce.[11] By subscribing to the viewpoint that a group of consumers engages in a shared practice in which meanings are negotiated and co-designed (and products and services are improved or newly developed) the importance of the network itself is fore grounded. It gives particular attention to the relationship between participatory media spectatorship in brand-related interpretation and the development of practices for a new kind of consumer culture, emphasizing the trajectory of consumption of corporate media content.

In this view, there are ways of becoming a participant, ways of participating, and ways in which participants and practices change, underpinning processes whereby newcomers that enter the brand network may learn practices from the "old schoolers" implying that members can contribute according to their own desires, needs, and skills.[12] For example, not all developers who contribute to OpenSimulator (an open source server platform for hosting virtual worlds) are granted access to write code to the repository. Newcomers may be granted those privileges when they have proven themselves over time in terms of reliability, technology usage (such as IRC) and delivering good work. Holding the position of a core developer for that matter is not guaranteed either. When a core member starts investing less time and energy in contributing work, s/he is likely to be replaced underpinning the trajectory of user participation as a rather stringent and distributed (review) process where the fluid boundaries between the different skills and contributions are constantly fine-tuned, confirmed and reconfirmed so as not to compromise the overall network.[13]

In the marriage of commerce to customer loyalty, user participation on the company-hosted platform holds the 'key to wisdom'. More specifically, the rise of user participation is said to downplay professional expertise associated with a closed and proprietary-based understanding of the media broadcasting system, favoring the growth of knowledge associated with open networks encompassing all participants, across traditional producer/consumer boundaries. Such online networks are increasingly recognized as effective organizational and design principles that enable and facilitate the development of relationships, nurture new knowledge, stimulate innovation, and share knowledge within and across typical systematic limitations.[14]

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11   See Hartley (2008).
12   See Lave and Wenger (1991).
13   Cf. 'meritocracy' in Berdou (2007).
14   See van der Graaf (2009).

This knowledge-based view of the content provider understands learning as an interactive process where knowledge is a collective asset dispersed among networked media properties and users; knowledge which then enhances the competencies of both. Through these new relationships, community members are seen to engage in various practices and exchange information, providing a basis for the media company to enhance its ability to know and to learn, highlighting users as part of the organizations dynamic knowledge base.

Against this backdrop, the customer or audience is no longer someone to target and 'market to' but someone to 'market with' emphasizing collaboration and co-creation of value between the (media company) brand, division or media property with customers and supply and value network partners. More specifically, the brand network shifts the mostly tactical perspective of the four Ps – i.e. product, price, promotion, and place – to the largely strategic perspective of co-creating services, value propositions, conversation and dialogue, and value processes and networks associated with a service-dominant logic.[15] Following this logic, the digital media platform would benefit from approaching its business as selling service flows centered on branded goods or services associated with transparency in the information exchange process, keeping the best interest and well-being of its user base at heart and facilitating the development of specialized skills and knowledge as a stimulant of economic growth.

Toolkits for User Participation

Within successful brand network development there should be a deeply embedded invitation for customers, users or audiences to create valuable meetings or relationships between branded goods and services, with themselves, and with others. Making people feel welcome on a corporate media-based platform effectively deals with "spreadable" media. In C3's foundational white paper If It Doesn't Spread, it's Dead, the mechanisms of participatory culture and the networked information society are shown to be value-driven rather than being predicated by transaction costs associated with exchange economics. More specifically, the paper highlighted the role of users and communities in the production, aggregation, and circulation of digital content underpinned by principles of collaboration, collective intelligence, and social participation.

Companies wishing to benefit from such online practices should reconsider their interface with their consumers by offering online spaces where people can play games, watch movies, share files and the like in order to co-create or promote a company's product, service or brand. By relying upon blurring the boundaries between production, distribution, and consumption practices, companies can encourage the target audience to "work" for them, particularly, in online value creation. Company-provided toolkits have been shown to assist in this practice of systematically outsourcing certain creation tasks from the locus of the company to consumers. Toolkits tend to lower the threshold of engaging customers by enabling and facilitating user participation in product development, supporting customers to create value and products that correspond to their individual interests and needs.[16]

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15   See Lusch and Vargo (2006).
16   See von Hippel (2005).

Let's take a closer look at the role of toolkits in the games/3D software industries. In particular, first person shooters (FPS), virtual worlds, and 3D collaborative platforms tend to be purposely designed and equipped with a toolkit, enabling and guiding user or mod developers in unlocking (some of) the capabilities of the software's core. Here, toolkits are specialized software applications that are necessary for particular parts of the game development process, such as level editing and script compilation.[17] They come in a variety of forms. There are specific 'within-company toolkits'. The company equips its developers with tools they need in order to work. These tools may be internally designed but can also be third party developed like commercial-off-the-shelf graphics packages such as Maya, and Photoshop. 'End user toolkits' may be developed and provided by the firm. These toolkits appear to vary from being completely identical to the tools used internally, to specifically designed end user tools. They may also be third party tools that come with the product or, if allowed and compatible, used on the mod developers' own account. And lastly, again if allowed and possible, mod developers may develop their own tools to mod the game, world or platform. Furthermore, both first and third party toolkits may be located internal and external to the game/3D environment.[18] But, how is user participation organized by the deployment of these toolkits in one of the most popular virtual worlds, World of Warcraft (Blizzard Entertainment), in one the most extreme cases of user involvement in Second Life (Linden Lab) and by one of the most popular game developers of FPS, Valve Inc.?

For World of Warcraft (WoW) user participation in mod development practices is enabled and facilitated by the company's API-based user customization tools. These tools can only be used to mod the user interface via so-called 'add-ons' (i.e. files located in the mod developer's game folder that enhance her/his interaction with WoW, such as created in XML) and 'macros' (i.e. combinations of actions that are executed in one go). Third party tools are not allowed. Nor are, for example, outside-world developed macros. In fact, those are considered 'exploits' – and, against the Terms of Service - and can lead to some kind of punishment, and even to being banned.[19] Users have thus full control over the 'look and feel' of toolbars, hot keys, and macros that assist in making alterations to, for example, the built-in player, menu buttons, and even the entire standard WoW interface can be modded (and thus replaced) to induce its functionality. For WoW, mods can be stand-alone, built on libraries, and can be a combination of several individually created mods.

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17   See van der Graaf (2009).
18   See van der Graaf (2009).
19   Cf. Consalvo (2007).

Second Life is a service that enables and facilitates online user interactions on a 3D Web-based platform where users, gratis or for a subscription fee, are free to choose, develop, and modify the service environment. This seems to push Second Life in the direction of approaching an advanced-level social network service that is intertwined with 3D attributes. The platform constitutes of the Second Life Viewer (or client application), and enables users to access and interact with the 3D platform and others. The Viewer is similar to a Web browser à la Firefox in that both are software applications that connect to Web servers ('the grid') and retrieve, or render, respectively, 3D content or Web pages on the user's screen. In this Viewer, the 'browser' and 'tool' functionalities are integrated allowing users to build, script, and texture the 3D environment. For example, with a 3D modeling tool users can build buildings, vehicles, furniture, and so forth that can be used, exchanged, or sold, and with the Linden Scripting Language behavior of in-world objects, can be managed and controlled. Certain graphics, animations, and sounds can also be externally created such as with third party animation editors like Poser, and uploaded into Second Life.

In these two examples, toolkits are custom-released by the media company for a specific environment. Tools, however, are also frequently re-used for other games and other 3D settings (i.e. internally developed, licensed to third party developers, and mod communities). For example, game developer Valve has included its Source Development Kit (SDK) with first party tools such as Faceposer, Valve Hammer editor, Half-Life Model Viewer, and third party tool Softimage|XSI EXP which was also used internally to develop the FPS Half-Life 2. For some tools (part of) the source code is also available such as for the Half-Life Model Viewer that enables users to mod the Viewer toolkit itself as well.[20]

In fact, there are many instances of users that seek (legal and illegal) ways to surpass the participation or design limits set by the company.[21]

The examples of WoW, Second Life, and Half-Life show that tools are a key strategy component of creating a firm-hosted experiential platform guided by experiential positioning and the promise of experiential value. More specifically, toolkits can allow users different modalities in design possibilities, ranging from having very simple scope ('low-end') such as having the choice to select between various options like size and color, to granting users the opportunity to come up with new products ('high-end').[22] The more basic type of toolkit is typically used to exploit mature markets, while the more advanced kind tends to be used in the exploration of new and/or opportunities for products and services.

The nature of user participation is such that on an ongoing basis content and code are added, removed and changed by both users and the host organization raising the issue of transferability within the brand network. FPS modding, for example, can be seen as the most innovative and sophisticated instance of modding for PC games. Yet in comparison to Second Life's seemingly open and extensible platform (underpinned by a mixture of proprietary, free and open source software) PC-modding is legally and economically rather limited.

20   Some companies also use the game engine to enable and facilitate user participation such as Valve (Source engine), id Software (id Tech), and Epic Games (Unreal engine).
21   See Nieborg and van der Graaf (2008).
22   See Thomke and von Hippel (2002).

User participation in the commercial context then means dealing with design limits constructed by the media company, which are of a technical and artificial nature and are purposeful and coincidental. Thus, controlling parts of the design such as code, yet not the creation activities, implicitly influences the organization of platform development designed around a branded product or service between the company and user base. This may raise legal concerns. Therein lies the space that customers/users have at their disposal to work in, negotiate with, and remake as an integral part of the platform's overarching strategy. These limitations indicates that user participation on a company-hosted platform, in many cases, is limited in terms of production, transferability, integration, usage and compensation within and across product or service boundaries. With this in mind, there are five important attributes, however, that have been shown to make toolkits useful or successful for the developer and user communities:

1.   Facilitate dynamic trial-and-error learning;

2.   Allow for a solution space in assisting and enabling (particular) design creation;

3.   Be (relatively) user-friendly;

4.   Provide libraries, modules, and other components for usage and inclusion; and

5.   User-generated content, such as mods, which can be appropriated, (re)produced and integrated by the developer.[23]

The Make Up and Patterns of Participation

Consumers have been shown to participate in brand-related practices in areas such as industrial, consumer and information products. However, their reasons for participation sometimes remain unclear. Consumers are likely to participate when they seek to satisfy their own interests and needs (See Appendix I). More generally, however, research has tended to examine motives independently, highlighting a number of intrinsic motivations such as enjoyment, learning and the process of participation, and extrinsic benefits such as platform community and peer recognition, reputation and career advancement.[24] Yet, not every participant in the brand network is Mozart, or Mark Zuckerberg, or John Carmac for that matter. Who are all those You's who claim to indulge in digital development practices?[25]

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23   See von Hippel (2005).
24   See Behr (2007); Jeppesen (2004); Shah (2006); van der Graaf (2009); West and Gallagher (2006); Yee (2006).
25   To date, there seems not much systematic research readily available on user participation in an online context. The few studies that have appeared, however, present a rather bleak picture, indicating that a relatively small percentage of users are actual bloggers, video uploaders, game modders, social network lay-out developers (cf. Li and Bernoff (2008); Palfrey and Gasser (2008); Pew (2010).

Several (mostly non-empirical) studies have appeared that have aimed to measure user participation in online communities. These tended to indicate orientations such as a 'lurker/poster' dichotomy (or, passive/active participation), location of consumption practice, and social and topical involvement.[26] Yet, there does not seem to be one typology of 'the' user-as-participant or what her/his particular participation patterns are in the context of the design principles underlying online development practices. Moreover, none of these studies seem to have provided a systematic empirically grounded investigation into the ways users may participate on a media-based online platform, what they may contribute and how and with what frequency they may interact with others.

For these reasons, an empirical investigation of the participatory structures of social networks (à la Facebook), microblogs (à la Twitter), and 3D collaborative platforms (à la Second Life) was recently conducted.[27] Each platform investigation revealed a particular form of collaborative community architecture, with each revealing different interactions between the goals of corporate producers and the interests of members of the consumption community. This study has resulted in a topology of brand-related memberships that are profiled against the following 'participation qualities': participation patterns, communication behavior, and several general user characteristics.[28] Based on this survey data, four classification variables were developed and tested: duration of visits, design capabilities (i.e. type of participatory activities), and information retrieval and supply.

In the case of Second Life, the specific behaviors based on these classification variables are:

•   In-world visits which provided insight into the average duration of weekly Second Life visits;

•   Building, texturing, scripting and open sourcing are considered to be the main formats to contribute to mod development practices underpinning the development of the Second Life platform;

•   Information retrieval – i.e. 'read blog', 'forums', 'scripters/developers mailing list', 'open source/linden scripting language portal' or 'in-world group messages' – and,

•   Information supply – i.e. 'post blog', 'forums', 'scripters/developers mailing list', 'open source/linden scripting language portal', 'in-world group messages' - yield insight into participation in interactions concerning Second Life.

Based on the analysis of participation patterns, communication behaviors, and several additional characteristics, six membership profiles were developed (see Appendix II). These membership profiles highlighted gradations of user participation in digital production workflow contributions which were based on differences in creative capacities, the degree of using community resources and the type of contributions users produce guided by the intrinsic design platform.[29]

26   See Rheingold (1993); Cova and Cova (2002); Li and Bernoff (2008); Crowston and Howison (2005); Kozinets (1999).
27   See van der Graaf (b).
28   See de Valck (2005); Wiertz and de Ruyter (2007).
29   See van der Graaf (2009).

For example, power rezzers and facilitators seem to have an interest in engaging in open source practices (see Appendix II). Their communication behavior showed that power rezzers maintain a strong involvement in retrieving and supplying information to the various Web-based communication channels, while functionalists expressed an active engagement in mainly information retrieval. Based on their development interaction patterns these two memberships are capable of developing high-end iterated innovations of the Second Life Viewer and core technology. These type of contributions tend to be solution-based and more need-related which may point to a more advanced user participant (or, 'lead user').

From these insights it can be gathered that differences in user experience levels are strongly connected to the user's (shared) participation in the development of the platform. By including a broader range of membership profiles, a more nuanced and complete understanding of the qualities of brand network memberships can be demonstrated, by connecting different users to a diverse range of experience levels.

This perspective enhances our understanding of user participation in relation to the company's capacity to benefit or learn. Rather than being purely transfer-based, learning is understood as a social process shaped and maintained within the brand network underpinning the formation of social relationships, the nurturing of new knowledge, and the stimulation of user creativity which catalyzes the communication between the media company and the platform user community.

As a result, brand network membership may influence users and the company as participants and, subsequently, as learners. User participation, therefore, is a case of consulting with users, who may provide the company with ideas about discovering, developing, and refining the platform. The company may generate the initial code underlying the product or service structure, but that resource is instantiated in a dynamic arrangement involving the brand network. In other words, users and (representatives of) the host company intersect and communication within a built community context of shared practices and platform. This hybrid company/user community allows opportunities for individual and collective development to happen, illustrating the strategic advantage of and iterative learning opportunities generated by a commitment to brand network design and development (See Appendix III for a case study of U.S. Army implementation of the ideas discussed in this memo).[30]

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30   Cf. Antorini (2007).

Summary and Implications

In this C3 Research Memo, attention has been drawn to the rapidly expanding number of companies that have noticed 'your' creative endeavors in various online capacities. Increasingly, companies can be seen to invite and host virtual communities of consumption to join their platforms (which provide an unprecedented capability as resources of information). This memo is framed to identify the dynamics of contributing consumers as participants, creators and learners in the context of company-hosted digital development practices associated with branded products and services. By yielding insight into the ways participation and practices are structured and organized across company boundaries, this research memo has sought to provide a deeper understanding of the blending together of social dynamics and commerce as a significant aspect of the emerging knowledge-based economy.

The main dynamics underlying this process are:

•   Users are capable, interested, and ready to participate on the company-hosted platform, and provide information on: 1) the use of branded products/services; 2) problems in product/service design; and 3) consumer-made first of type, major and minor improvements.

•   Users value to get directly involved, to learn from experience and to gain knowledge; they appreciate a product or service environment that broadens their perspectives and is a tool of expression, and requires effort and refinement to achieve individual results – associated with a personal growth-based economy.

•   Users are distinctive in their priorities, make-up and patterns of participation.

•   There is resonance with users' perceptions of the value of their contributions.

•   Users accept a mix of free and premium platform-provided or user-developed digital goods and services, and many download before buy (pay with attention).

•   The company-hosted platform to users is shared, creative, conversational, compact, easy, cheap, intangible, and multi-platform/device.

•   The consumption and user engagement process is process-oriented, challenge-inspired, and quality-driven.

User participation in the context of commerce is a work-in-progress where goals, appearance, and usage guide a change-inducing result for the (configuration of) business. Such a dynamic of 'give and take' among constellations of participating members in the brand network demonstrates an interdependent relationship between the company and consumer base underlying product or service development that is simultaneously structured and emergent, top-down and bottom-up, centralized and dispersed, commercial and non-commercial.

In other words, the architecture of user participation on the company-hosted platform suggests a complex intersection of designed and emergent development practices guided by various tools and support systems, attracting contributors with different interests, skills, and knowledge levels which results in different kinds of contributions and lessons to be learned. Yet the digital sky is limited. Some of these limitations are related to certain user preferences and practices that may be contrary to the company's overarching strategy and therefore legal system, while others may point towards constraints of a more technical nature.

The following recommendations are offered to guide the development and maintenance of the brand network:

1.   Cater to different member types.

Gradations of user participation in development activities exist, highlighting differences in creative capacities and the contributions users make. Tracking how consumers may participate, the types of contributions they may make, and what kinds and how frequently interactions may occur on the company-hosted platform, is key to the cultivation of the brand network.[31]

2.   Toolkits!

Since the early 2000s or so, home improvement shows make for popular TV. Since we cannot all be Ty Pennington or Martha Stewart, these kind of TV shows teach people at home the tricks of the 'build and decorate' trade. They demonstrate and explain which tools to use in what situation, how to use them, and so forth, enabling and facilitating people to transform their homes in a dream house according to their own liking. This 'tinkering and toying' to personalize one's living space links user participation to customization, highlighting the role of tools. Providing (purposively) toolkits is a means of systematically outsourcing certain design tasks from the company to the user, assisting users in improving and developing new products and services. In this way, users are presented with a broader palette to participate, better equipping them to advance and develop products according to their own interests and needs, while contributing to brand development.

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31   Cf. 'tiering in ARGs' in Dena (2008).

3.   When you welcome customers, make them feel welcome.

A commercial approach to user participation draws attention to the company's openness, yet, in many cases, also has a closed meaning to it. In other words, the company encourages user participation but, by controlling parts of the design, implicitly encapsulates user development as proprietary extensions of the branded product or service. Users seem to find themselves in the peculiar situation of being in the business of creating proprietary experiences (bound by the company's software) that can be commercial and non-commercial proprietary extensions of the brand, and this is particularly beneficial for the company. This raises questions regarding ownership and compensation.[32]

4.   Know what to learn from whom.

Consumers seem to master and work around their particular interest, creating a centripetal force defined by core competencies developed by individual users. As a result, the company has access to multiple knowledge loci for establishing learning opportunities. Yet, there seems to be a point at which too many learning opportunities for the company may result in a 'bottleneck' which stagnates development and leads to user dissatisfaction and, arguably, increasingly motivates users to 'do it themselves' causing a 'participation tipping point'. When the company is incapable of effectively dealing with potential learning moments, the company risks failing to learn. This may possibly endanger a transparent, effective, and trust-inducing interdependent relationship between the company and customer base that underlies the brand network.

5.   Approach your platform as playground.

It may already be hard to lure consumers to the company-hosted platform, but it is even harder to make a lasting impression that makes users want to log back in again and again. A combination of sociality, creativity, and innovative potential is likely to trigger intrinsic sources of motivation in a number of consumers. The participation process on the company-hosted platform should be playful. This experiential vision of consumption makes for an immersive online experience (visual, social, authentic, thematic, narrative-based, customizable, spreadable, simple and complex) The challenging task for the company is to coordinate, integrate and learn from its user base in order to nurture a self-sustaining brand culture.

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32   See discussion on issues surrounding "Web 2.0" in Jenkins et al. (2008).

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Appendix I

In a study on Valve Games, respondents were asked about their interest and participation in mod-related practices.[33] Some 23.5% of the respondents reported to produce mods of Valve games (N= 136). Of these modders:

- 50.0% reported to develop total conversions
- 21.9% created maps
- 18.8% generated small changes (such as textures and sounds)
- 9.3% stated to do other things such as producing machinima.

Respondents reported to produce mods for reasons of, among others, the prospect of creating different and new experiences (34.4%). Other reasons included boredom with official Valve games and the promise to create better games than the official ones. Furthermore, more than half of the respondents reported to install and play mods on a regular basis, and 41.9% said that they are willing to pay for user-produced mods.

These findings point to a positive net effect of mod development for the game developer. In particular, user participation has increased the sales of the basic proprietary software, as it is needed to play the mods. Mods, therefore, extent the interest of gamers into the original game's franchise; they can add to the shelf life of the original game; they can build a new brand; and, subsequently mods can serve as a retention tool (see Appendix I).

The main reason why people do not mod is that it is too difficult (53.8%). Other reasons included lack of time, lack of robust documentation, lack of financial gain, and the difficulty to get a group of like-minded and skilled people together. Respondents learn about cool mods via, among others sources:

- Message boards (34.6%)
- Gaming and fan sites (37.5%)
- Online friends (12.5%)
- Real-life friends (2.9%).

Also, some 52.9% strongly believes that Valve can learn from interacting with gamers in general, and modders in particular, about (further) developing their games. More than half, however, was happy with the ways Valve deals with feedback from the community (M= 2.3, SD= 1.41, N= 136).

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33   See van der Graaf (a).

Appendix II

The analysis resulted in six membership profiles that were based on individual participation patterns, communication behavior, and several additional variables, that is, year of registration, membership type, land ownership, age, income, monthly expenditures, monthly sales, and monthly account balance.

Twink. The first cluster groups 15% of the respondents. Each week, these users spend 9 to 15 hours in Second Life. They have used tools to build, texture, and, particularly, script, and they have an interest in modding the Second Life Viewer. Furthermore, the respondents are rather passively involved in platform communications by mainly retrieving information that is provided on the blog, forums, mailing lists, wiki portal, and in-world. The blog, Linden Scripting Language (LSL) portal, and in-world group messages are read on a weekly basis, whereas the other communication means are less frequently read (only a few times per month). This group hardly ever supplies information to the Second Life community. If they do participate in information supply, it tends to be on the blog (via comments), forums, scripters mailing list, and in-world group messages.

Newb. The second cluster contains the largest group of respondents (26%). They spend weekly 9 to 15 hours in Second Life and are potentially interested in engaging in building activities. There is no pro/con attitude towards the other tools for creative endeavors. The respondents' communication behaviors indicate that they are not actively involved in the community. The forums and in-world messages are only read a few times per month and contributions are seldom made to in-world group chats.

Pro. The third cluster accounts for 17% of the respondents. These Second Life users tend to be more actively involved than users of the first two clusters. They spend between 25 to 40 hours per week in-world, where they repeatedly engage in building practices. Particularly, scripting activities have also been performed. The respondents are heavy users of the in-world messaging system. On a daily basis messages are read and a few times per week messages are supplied. The forums, however, are used only on a monthly basis where a similar amount of information is retrieved and supplied. They are not active readers of the blog, but do comment once or twice a month. The LSL portal is read a few times per month, whereas the mailing lists and the open source portal hardly ever get read. Contributions to these channels are not made.

Power rezzer. This is the smallest cluster containing 9% of the respondents. These users also spend 25 to 40 hours per week in-world. Building and texturing are their core activities. They have engaged in scripting and would be interested in contributing to open sourcing Second Life. From their communication behavior, it can be gathered that this group of users is an active bunch that is highly vested in Second Life. The respondents are 'power users' in their behavior of both retrieving and supplying information. In-world messages are read on a daily basis. The forums, scripters and developers mailing lists and LSL portal a few times a week, while the blog and open source portal are read once or twice per month. Power rezzers also supply information. A few times per month they contribute to the blog, forums, mailing lists, and LSL portal.

Facilitator. The fifth cluster is the second smallest group and groups 11% of the respondents. Facilitators spend each week 16 to 24 hours in-world. Similar to the first cluster, these Second Life users have engaged in building, texturing, and scripting activities yet do not seem to have a particular dis/interest in open source. Their communication patterns are quite different however. The respondents show a strong interest in the communal aspects of the Second Life community by reading the blog, forums, and in-world messages on a daily basis. To a lesser extent, information is read on the LSL portal, scripters mailing list, and open source portal. Information is also supplied to those channels, however, on a less frequent basis; once or twice a week contributions are made to the forums and in-world messages, and a few times each month, comments are made to the blog.

Experience broker. The final cluster constitutes 22% of the respondents. Each week users spend 16 to 24 hours in Second Life. Building is their main activity, while some experience with texturing is reported. No particular dis/interest can be detected in scripting, yet no ambition seems to exist for these users to contribute to open source activities. Users of this cluster are fairly engaged in reading (mostly) in-world group messages, the blog and forums. Information is also supplied but less frequently than it is retrieved. Monthly contributions are made to in-world messages and the forums, while the respondents rarely comment on the blog.

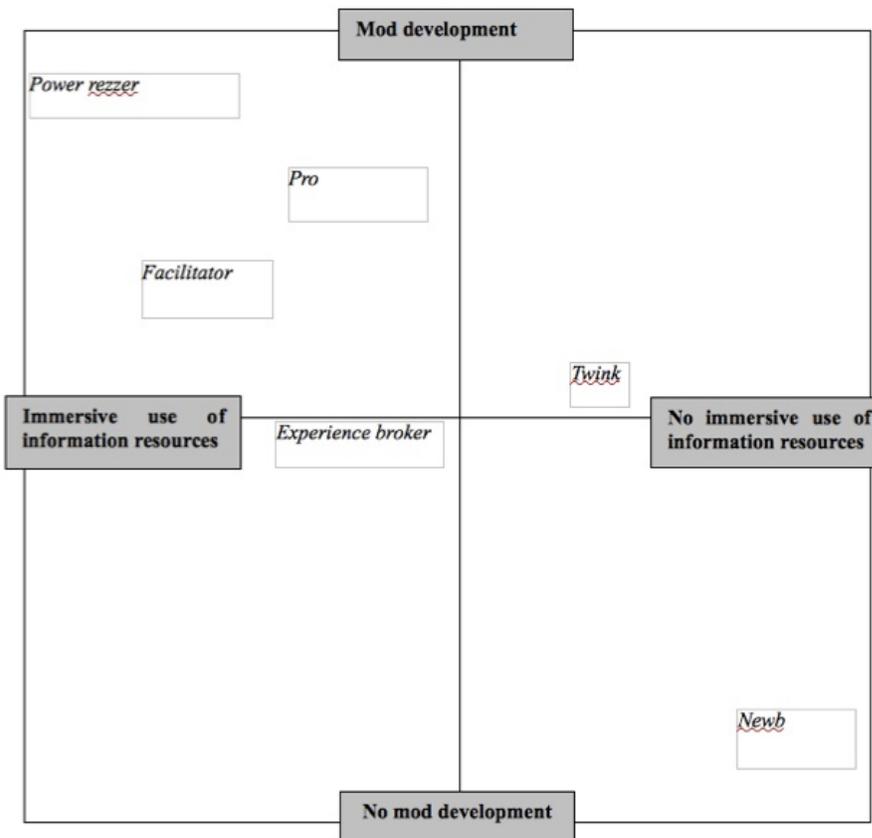The six membership profiles are presented in Figure 1:

Figure 1: Six Member Profiles

Appendix III

The US Army, for example, has been really successful in engaging users with the US Army brand. Especially, since the early 2000s the US Army developed strategies that adapt and turn cultural formats such as games into transient images in order to create ever-changing consumer experiences.
In 2002 the US Army launched the Army Game Project (or America's Army[34]) which is a series of video games and other media developed to, on the one hand, to train and educate soldiers serving in the US Army, and, on the other hand, to provide 'virtual soldiering' experiences to citizens as an answer to concerns about missed recruiting goals.[35] In particular, the game has built a relationship between gamers (whose profiles largely match those of the army's recruiting targets) and the US Army by transferring the emotion of the game to the Army brand that is powering it and creating an engaging experience that has positively influenced recruitment of new army personnel.[36]

The America's Army platform hosts several participant networks that largely consists of developers, moderators, beta testers, and gamers. The most important communication channel where these clusters interact is the official forum where everybody – i.e. in-game officials and the user base at large - can post and respond to messages. The investigation of these user-user and organization-user communications yield insight into, among others, idea generation and validation, problem-finding and -solving underpinning development practices across firm boundaries.[37]

Since the beginning of 2010 the US Army has also sought to leverage social media – i.e. YouTube, Facebook, MySpace, Twitter, Google Apps and other social tools - as a medium to allow soldiers to 'tell the Army story' and to connect and interact with those interested in the US Army. Fur this purpose the US Army has launched the brand portal 'My.Army.Mil – Your Army Media. How You Like It'. An exploratory study of several of the US Army-hosted communication tools and methods indicated that user participation in the setting of the army seems to underpin multiple learning opportunities between the organization and user base (especially in the cases where the US Army had implemented suggestions or innovations contributed by users).[38]

Furthermore, the empirical evidence of the various knowledge loci analysed - particularly, the forums, Flickr, and Twitter – points to differences in the appropriation of knowledge loci, highlighting differences in level of engagement and advancement of development which indicates a centripetal learning effect. In other words, crossover learning opportunities can occur yet they seem to remain within that particular locus for participation, seemingly bound by certain thresholds such as differences in skill sets.

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34   Since its release there have been over 26 versions with the most recent being America's Army 3. In addition, to the Web-based game, the series is also available on the Xbox and Xbox 360, arcade, and mobile applications, which are published through licensing arrangements.
35   See van der Graaf and Nieborg (2003).
36   See van der Graaf (2004).
37   The platform also hosts a support section, blogs, and announces tournaments, etc. Besides official ways to interact, there are many affiliated sites, both official and semi-official, and many fan and clan sites where gamers interact with each other.
38   See van der Graaf (b).