

Opening the Production Pipeline: Unruly Creators

John A. L. Banks

Creative Industries Research Applications Centre

Queensland University of Technology

ja.banks@qut.edu.au

Auran Games

Australia

jbanks@auran.com

ABSTRACT

This paper explores the implications and uptakes of game developers' increasing reliance on the creative labour of fan content creators. It draws on an ethnographic account of Australian game developer Auran's increasing reliance on train and rail fans in the process of developing *Trainz*: a train and railroad simulation. I argue that this is not simply a case of the exploitation of unknowing fans as a source of free labour. This research demonstrates that gamers are not only well aware of these practices; they are also sophisticated practitioners who participate in them. These complex entanglements of the proprietary and the non-proprietary, the commercial and the non-commercial, are not necessarily an appropriation of fandom by corporate bottom-line agendas. However, Auran's effort to integrate fan content creation into the commercial game development process struggles with the problem of fundamentally reorganising the project to support this kind of collaborative work.

Keywords

Games industry, ethnography, participatory culture

INTRODUCTION

This paper draws on material from an ethnography of the game developer–fan relationship [1, 2]. It offers an analysis of the rapidly transforming, reconfigured relationships between users and media producers in the games industry through an ethnographic account of Auran, a PC game development company located in Brisbane, Australia, covering the period from mid-2000 through to 2004.

From June 2000 my relationship with Auran shifted when I accepted employment as the company's online community relations manager. This role largely involves managing Auran's relations with an online rail-fan community that formed around the game development project, *Trainz* (<http://www.auran.com/TRS2004>): a train and railroad simulation released in December 2001. Auran has increasingly incorporated and involved train and rail fans in the process of designing and making *Trainz*. Using the tools provided with *Trainz*, users can make their own 3D rail world layouts and import 3D models of locomotives, and then share them with other users through the *Trainz* website. This end-user creativity and innovation is an integral part of the simulation's design. Fan-created content is an increasingly important feature of the PC game development process and of online PC game culture generally. These participatory culture

Proceedings of DiGRA 2005 Conference: Changing Views – Worlds in Play.

© 2005 Authors & Digital Games Research Association DiGRA. Personal and educational classroom use of this paper is allowed, commercial use requires specific permission from the author.

initiatives in the games industry are potentially redefining entertainment software towards an open-ended process in which users participate directly in the design, production and marketing processes [7, p.210], [4, 5, 6].

The commercial success of the *Trainz* project over a series of releases (most recently *Trainz Railroad Simulation 2004*) has come increasingly to rely on the unruly assemblage of an *ad hoc* distributed coproduction network of voluntary fan labour. In *The Internet Galaxy*, Manuel Castells reminds us that the information communication technologies of the internet introduce a socio-technical form that turns users into producers, thereby generating innovation, creativity and potential for productivity growth [3, p.5]. He argues that this collaborative, creative network is increasingly articulated with an entrepreneurial culture that seeks to assert the proprietary [3 pp.36–38]. A gift economy of collaboration and open, free sharing of ideas, techniques and know-how is connected uneasily with networked forms of business organisation and practice that increasingly rely on such forms of collaboration to generate innovation and productivity [4, 5]. As Tiziana Terranova argues in *Network Culture*, the important point here is not just the linkage between the proprietary and the non-proprietary, but the necessary reliance of these business enterprises on the free labour and voluntary production of these collaborative, decentralised networks [10, pp.73, 77-78, 94]

This reliance on a network of fan content creators raised questions concerning how Auran would manage the relationship. The difficulty arises of how this content will fit within the framework of a commercial development project. In short, what are the implications of opening the commercial game production pipeline to voluntary fan content creators? It would be a mistake, I argue, to view these emerging participatory culture relations as shaped and configured through an *opposition* between the commercial and the non-commercial, the corporate developer and the fan community [6]. Rather than being exterior and oppositional terms, these entities that are “Auran” and “the *Trainz* fan community” are immanent to these proprietary–non-proprietary and commercial–non-commercial dynamics. There is no exterior position from which to safely critique these antagonisms. The problem is how to participate in these processes.

AN UNEASY ALLIANCE

Both *Ultimate Trainz Collection* (2002) and *Trainz Railroad Simulator 2004* (2003) incorporate third-party fan content as part of the official commercial release package. In effect, Auran now relies on a pool of fan labour and volunteer enthusiasm as a routine part of the *Trainz* project. Auran’s strategy of increasingly involving the fans in the development and distribution of *Trainz* is, in part, a contingent response to a difficult commercial situation in which sales were not reaching anticipated levels. Drawing on fan content is an out-sourcing strategy aimed at lowering the increasing costs of art production. The opening of the game industry production process to end-user involvement and labour is a strategy to extract and capture surplus value [4, 7].

Auran management carefully assessed that, based on the then sales levels and the problems encountered with marketing and distribution, the costs associated with further internal art content creation at the scale required to support another release of *Trainz* could not be justified. The continuing commercial viability of *Trainz* relied on collaborating with the voluntary fan labour force. If it were not for the continuing support of the fan community, Auran would have stopped the project. In 2003, as Auran worked towards the next significant release, *Trainz Railroad Simulator 2004* (TRS2004), the decision was made to source new art content from the fan

content-creator network. The Auran development team concentrated on introducing new core features and functionality. The inclusion of fan content with Auran's official release package was therefore a quite contingent and strategic response to a particular commercial situation. Fan creators wishing to contribute content for the *TRS2004* release entered into a non-disclosure agreement, joining the Third-Party Support Program that was supported with a private password-protected forum area. The Auran development team determined the range and type of content assets required for the release and identified the fan content creators who would be approached to make the needed content.

Some members of the *Trainz* development team, particularly the producer, were sceptical about the viability of relying on fan volunteer creators to meet commitments for a commercial deadline. They were rightfully concerned that any problems or delays with finalising the core *TRS2004* code would provide the fan creators with very little time to update and finish their content. Once the new code was sufficiently stabilised, the content creators would need to undertake updates and modifications to ensure that their content functioned correctly with the code. Auran planned to provide the participating creators with early release builds of the new *TRS2004* code so that they had access to the new features and functionality. The problem was that this code might significantly change with the introduction of modifications, updates and fixes between builds as bugs and problems were identified. This would possibly invalidate work undertaken by the creators, requiring them to then undertake extensive revisions to successfully integrate their content with each successive build as we worked towards the final release version. This process of updating art asset content across builds can be a frustrating experience for internal game development team artists who have regular and close access to the programmers, let alone to an external distributed team of fan creators. The producer's concern was that the development team just would not have the time and resources available to adequately support the fan creators' efforts to finalise their content, as the team would be fully committed to the crunch phase over the closing stages of development. He also worried that the fan creators would not create the content according to Auran's guidelines, and this would then require significant fixing and updating by the Auran team before it could be included with the commercial release build. After taking into account the time and effort involved in communicating with the many creators, assisting them with information and help they needed, he argued that it may be less risky to undertake the art work in house, even if this meant reducing the amount of content that would be included with the package. Despite these reservations, Auran management decided to continue with outsourcing art production through the third-party content program.

Many of the content creators were attracted to the *TRS2004* program by Auran's promise that they would enjoy early access to builds of *TRS2004* and, more importantly, to direct support from members of the *Trainz* development team. The creators who were pursuing commercialisation of their content also viewed it as a valuable promotional opportunity, as having their content in the *TRS2004* release may encourage users to visit their websites and purchase their other content offerings. As the project progressed over the second half of 2003 it became increasingly difficult to meet the support expectations of the fan creators. The Auran developers received many emails, forum requests and telephone calls from creators seeking advice and assistance as they worked to finalise their content and get it in before the deadline. Fan creators were expressing dissatisfaction with the tardiness of replies from the Auran development team. Some abandoned their projects, feeling that it was just not possible to meet our commercial deadlines; after all, it was a hobby that they were pursuing on weekends and

evenings after work. A few emailed me stating that it was no longer fun and was becoming more of a job, and therefore they had made the decision to resign from the group. They would still work on the content, but at their own pace and release the content, when it was ready, through the *Trainz* website. Influential creators were expressing concerns about Auran's management of the third-party content program for the *TRS2004* project. In June 2003, Prjindigo, a leading third-party content creator, emailed that the code builds they were receiving in order to test their content were "incapable of doing the testing and creation that we need to be doing". He added that:

The lack of flexibility in scheduling that has been indicated to us with totally impossible fixed deadlines and a half-way announced inability to get us a working version of the first wide beta to do content for one week before it goes to full beta are real turn-offs to the content group ... The larger proportion of the 3rd party group expected a more smooth and fair treatment in the concerns of time to build and time to test than this schedule has compressed upon them.

His main concern was that the content creators were not being provided with the level of information and support that they needed:

I've seen quite a few people who barely got started on their work and then saw how the group was being handled like a third class citizen and so decided to give it a skip. If I didn't have the extra time to figure out what you may be doing or needing in the content before I make it and get it done, I'd have given it a skip too. While the amount of time for creation that you've given the community isn't unreasonable, it's still nearly impossible for most to do without having the information and tools to do it [Prjindigo, email to Auran].

However, despite these obstacles, I was amazed by the commitment of time that many of the fan creators gave to the project. The Auran development team worked closely with many of these creators to ensure that their content meshed with the final *TRS2004* build. A few of the creators even arranged to take leave from their employment over the closing stages to ensure that they met the Auran deadlines. I did feel, though, that we were not effectively following through on our commitments to support the fan creators' efforts adequately. Our expectation of working closely with such a large group of fan creators on such a limited project timeframe was ambitious, if not unrealistic. We significantly under-estimated the level of support that many of the creators needed. But from an Auran business perspective, the project was a success. Many of the creators were also very happy with the outcomes and continue to be an integral part of the ongoing *Trainz* project. When *TRS2004* was released in October 2004, the package included outstanding, high-quality content provided by this voluntary pool of fan labour. Thirty-five third-party fan creators had contributed content to the CD release and many fan community members had participated in the beta-testing process.

The *Trainz* team identified that trying to work with the large group of fan content creators in the *TRS2004* project resulted in frustration, misunderstandings and communication problems for both the fan creators and the Auran team. The group was just too large to manage and support effectively. Auran management therefore decided to reduce the size of the third-party program fan group and recently disbanded the official third-party content creation program, to be replaced

by a new *Trainz* Partnership Scheme. Direct support from the development team is now limited to select groups of creators who have submitted project proposals that are approved by Auran management. By working with a smaller number of organised creators, the development team can more carefully and selectively focus their support efforts. But this decision also means that we are unable to continue providing direct support for the broader fan content creator community. Auran is effectively endorsing an elite tier of fan content creators who will enjoy access to greater levels of direct support and information. They will, for example, have access to early builds of *Trainz* code. Auran is the gatekeeper, restricting access to early builds of the core *Trainz* platform.

Some fan creators expressed immediate concern and disappointment about our decision to disband the original third-party support group. Magicland posted to a forum thread: “Personally, I was surprised when the 3rd party group was disbanded, as originally the concept (or at least my understanding of it) had been to forge a closer working relationship with Auran, with better access, feedback, etc., and then it turned out just to be a factory for TRS content which shut down when that shipped”. [8] Others expressed similar views in forum posts and emails. Marlboro comments:

Well, a sound corporate course is plotted. Never had any doubts that Auran would think or act any different from any other commercially driven entity. They got to this point by utilizing hundreds of thousand of free hours provided by the community (be it 3rd party, beta, whatever) ... but it was always obvious that that ain't good enough for a “corporate” future ... For me it's a game, a hobby and mostly fun. If there is corporate background noise — fine. But if that noise levels increase too much it's time to tune in a new station. [9]

This foregrounds many of the controversies and conflicts that have shaped the *Trainz* third-party content-creator network. However, after reviewing the *TRS2004* third-party program outcomes, Auran management decided to continue integrating fan content with official *Trainz* releases. Outsourcing of content production to the fan creators will continue to be integral to the *Trainz* project. The next version, *Trainz Engineers Edition*, is scheduled for release in mid 2005 and will prominently feature fan content.

The content creators' views on our plans are varied: there is no singular *Trainz* fan position on these issues. For many, these creative activities emerge from their shared passion for trains and rail: for others it concerns the satisfaction derived from carefully crafting a detailed model, or the social status gained within the *Trainz* community for freely sharing their creations. In some instances, this productive activity is freely given. Others pursue the commercial opportunities that are available for their creative endeavors. The intersection of these diverse practices and interests generates conflict and tensions concerning how the rights to material are to be negotiated and who should have access to information and support. Auran's ultimate concern is profitable business outcomes, and this means production processes that are carefully managed, scheduled and regulated. Many of the third-party creators, on the other hand are motivated by their passionate investment in trains and rail and by the social rewards that are associated with their position as high-profile creators in the fan community. The ways in which these different practices and understandings come together are uneven and even conflictual. The Auran *Trainz* team itself is far from united in its understanding of this collaborative production process.

Producers, programmers, artists, community development managers and CEOs have very different understandings of how the relationships should be managed. But it is from these uneven, multiple and messy practices, negotiations, actants and materials that participatory culture is being made and negotiated. The fact that the work of the fan creators on the *Trainz Railroad Simulator 2004* project did not entirely mesh with Auran's project schedule points to how this voluntary workforce can be unruly, difficult to control and guided by their own interests and agendas.

CONCLUSION

I argue that Auran's reliance on fan content is not simply a case of the exploitation of unknowing fans as a source of free labour [10. pp. 70, 79-80]. This research demonstrates that gamers are not only well aware of these practices; they are also sophisticated practitioners who participate in them. These complex and necessary entanglements of the proprietary and the non-proprietary, the commercial and the non-commercial, are not necessarily an appropriation or incorporation of fandom by corporate bottom-line agendas. The more difficult and urgent questions concern the implications and uptakes of gamers' direct participation and involvement in these production processes. The problem here is that such *ad hoc* fan content creation networks do not fit comfortably within the frame of corporate project schedules. They're unruly, messy and disruptive. They challenge our understandings of what a software project is and how it should be managed. Terranova suggests that these reconfigurations of the relations between production and consumption within an "open and distributed mode of production" are "already the field of experimentation of new strategies of organization" for modulating the "relation between value and surplus value" [10. pp 96-7]. These emerging dynamics between Auran and the *Trainz* fans indicate a significant reconfiguration of the networks through which categories such as fan, consumer, producer and developer are made. Auran's effort to incorporate fan content creation into the game development process struggles with the problem of fundamentally reorganizing the project to support this kind of work. The player creators are never fully integrated into the design and development stages of the project. What would it mean to radically reorganise the development process and associated organizational structures to account for and support the fan content creators' contributions? Game companies such as Auran are yet to fully engage with the implications of this question.

REFERENCES

1. Banks, J.A. *Participatory Culture and Enjoyment in the Video Games Industry: Reconfiguring the Player-Developer Relationship*. PhD Dissertation. University of Queensland, 2004.
2. Banks, J.A. "Gamers as Co-Creators: Enlisting the Virtual Audience — A Report from the Net Face." *Mobilising the Audience*. Balnaves, M., O'Regan, T., and Sternberg, J. (eds.). University of Queensland Press, Brisbane, 2002.
3. Castells, Manuel. *The Internet Galaxy: Reflection on the Internet, Business, and Society*. Oxford University Press, Oxford, 2001
4. Hartley, John. "The 'Value Chain of Meaning' and the New Economy." in *International Journal of Cultural Studies*. vol.7, no. 1 (2004), pp.129-41
5. Humphreys, S. "Productive Players: Online Computer Games' Challenge to Conventional Media Forms" in *Journal of Communication and Critical/Cultural Studies*. vol.2, no.1 (March 2005), pp36-50.
6. Jenkins, Henry. "Interactive Audiences?" *The NewMedia Book*. Harries, D. (ed.). British Film Institute, London, 2002.

7. Kline, Stephen, Dyer-Witheford, N., and De Peuter, G. *Digital Play: The Interaction of Technology, Culture and Marketing*. McGill-Queen's University Press, Montreal, 2003.
8. Magicland. "Beta Tester Tickets?" *Trainz Online Forum*.
<http://forums.auran.com/TRS2004/forum/showthread.php?threadid=61599&referrerid=5>, 4 June 2004.
9. Marlboro. "Moving Ahead with 3rd Party Support: The Trainz Partnership Scheme" *Trainz Online Forum*, <http://forums.auran.com/TRS2004/forum/showthread.php?threadid=63622&referrerid=5>, 25 June 2004
10. Terranova, Tiziana. *Network Culture: Politics for the Information Age*. Pluto Press, London, 2004.