

Black Boxes and Co-Creation in *LittleBigPlanet 2*

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Abstract

This paper discusses black boxes and their role as mediators in the user experience of co-creative networks. Using Actor Network Theory, I trace the people, groups, and technologies that assemble around the moderation of player-generated content in Media Molecule's *LittleBigPlanet 2*. More specifically, I examine the *Good Grief! System*'s role in mediating the moderation process between player-creators and moderators. This system frames moderation as a participatory practice initiated by people playing levels. However the system also establishes a black box around the processes of assessing and moderating reported levels. This makes the moderation process opaque to the player-creator community, locking them away from the moderation process and disempowering them as creative agents. Co-creative networks enable participation, but use black boxes to structure the participatory activities that player-creators pursue. As a result, much of the coordinative and collaborative work of network participants centers upon the black box, what it renders invisible, and how to test its boundaries.

Keywords

co-creation, participatory culture, games, black boxes, actor network theory

Introduction

Co-creation has emerged as an integral component of the participatory experience for many popular media franchises. As Jenkins (1992 & 2006) notes, fans of popular books, films, and games often seek to take part in the meaningful construction of their fan experiences, turning to the creation of many forms of content in order to do so. Co-creation enlists the fan's

desire to participate in the meaningful creation of culture so that this participation is also productive and valuable for those who own that culture in the form of intellectual property (IP) (Deuze, 2007; Kucklich, 2005; Terranova, 2000 & 2004). In games such as Media Molecule's *LittleBigPlanet 2* (2011), developers and publishers market the support of player-generated content as a central feature of the game software and the player experience (Sotamaa, 2010; see also Postigo, 2007, 2008, & 2010). Players who become creators use the proprietary technologies and networks provided by Sony and Media Molecule alongside other blogs, wikis, and forums that do not fall under the ownership of these companies (Taylor, 2007). Player-creators produce content, coordinate activities with one another, and seek relevant information in social systems and technologies both inside and outside of the proprietary spaces established by game publishers and developers.

As such the “discourses, technologies and community practices” of these participatory cultures are simultaneously “outside the industry but also inside it” (Postigo, 2010, n.p.). Player-produced content is situated within a network infrastructure where that content can be copied, reinscribed in a different form, and repurposed by moving it from one space to another, from one technology to another, from inside the industry to outside of it and vice versa. Researchers encounter not only the practices and identities of individuals and participatory cultures, but also the user experience of these systems and the ways they enable or limit participatory practices (Potts, 2010; Sotamaa, 2007). For this reason, understanding the user experience these systems is critical to the research of participatory cultures, participatory practices, and the role of participation in the production and distribution of culture. In addition, viewing the user experience of these systems alongside an analysis of their impact on the relationships between player-creators and the gaming industry can shed light on the design of technologies that support co-creative participatory cultures.

One way to better understand the user experience of co-creation is to examine the ways proprietary systems, technologies, and policies are situated within ‘black boxes’ in order to maintain their durability and the integrity of their functions across the network (Latour, 1987). In this paper, I examine the *Good Grief! System*, or the moderation system for *LBP 2*, as a black box that encases technologies, groups, and policies within an “opaque” (Latour, 1999) space that hides and confuses the ways these proprietary actors are implemented. The *Good Grief! System* performs two maneuvers: 1) It veils the implementation of the moderation process so in an effort to make it impenetrable to participants who wish to understand the functions and operations these proprietary actors; 2) It extends the reach of these processes and technologies

so that they impact participatory activity that occurs in non-proprietary spaces. The user experience of the *Good Grief! System* enlists *LBP 2* participants in the moderation of player-produced content. But the system also limits the scope of their participation and their view of the moderation process. As a result, the black box of the *Good Grief! System* is fortified to prevent participants understanding the ways moderation takes place and the ways policies are implemented.

Tracing Black Boxes in an Actor Network

To examine the *Good Grief! System* and its role within the actor network that facilitates moderation, I employ Potts's (2008, 2009, & 2010) method of tracing the connections among actors. This method, based on Actor Network Theory (ANT), aims to map the people, groups, and technologies within a network, and to then analyze their relationships in order to examine "shifts in practice" that occur among these actors (2010, p. 307). The purpose is to trace connections among actors and examine the ways these connections enable and constrain the practices of network participants, such as the player-creators in *LBP 2*. In this way, researchers can examine the ways the design of technologies affect the user experience of participation "across the mediascape of technologies and people" (2009, p. 285). It is crucial for researchers to understand that participation within a network is not contingent upon a participant's interaction with a single technology or system. Instead, networked interactions such as co-creation are affected by the entire ecology of the network where the operations and functions of one actor can alter those of another.

I augment Potts's method by more specifically examining the ways the relationships among proprietary actors are encased within black boxes. Black boxes can serve as liaisons among actors, or to simplify complex relationships among actors so that they can communicate or coordinate activity more effectively (Spinuzzi, 2008). Latour (1987 & 1999) states that a black box is a collection of actors that are assembled within a single point and "slowly turned into something that resembles an organized whole" (1987, pp. 130-131). The black box in which these actors are assembled and encased can then stand in for the complex relationships among the network actors it contains. In this way, network actors outside of the black box "need focus only on [the black box's] inputs and outputs and not on its internal complexity" (1999, p. 304). Once the black box is assembled, Latour argues that it becomes "entirely opaque" to the rest of the actor network (p. 183). The linkages among actors—as well as the purposes, roles, and functionality of those actors—can be veiled within the black box so that the complexities of these relationships disappear from the view of other actors. As Latour states, "If everything goes

well it begins to look as if the black boxes were effortlessly gliding through space as a result of their own impetus” (1987, p. 132).

To trace black boxes that form around proprietary technologies, networks, and systems in an actor network, I perform three steps. First, I identify those actors that fall under the management and control of Sony and Media Molecule. Second, I trace the connections among those actors by examining the processes in which they become critical components. And third, I examine the user interface of the proprietary actor that links player-creators, fans, and other participants to the black box and the connections and processes encased within it. In this way, I can examine the linkages among actors both inside and outside of the black box, and trace the ways those linkages are forged or maintained through tools that hide the complexity of these processes. This framework supports an analysis of the potential impact of black boxes on the practices of co-creative participants. Researchers can survey the ways these systems influence the interactions that individual participations and participatory cultures have not only with single systems, but with the broader co-creative network and its goals, as well.

The Good Grief! System

According to the manual included with *LBP 2*, the *Good Grief! System* is “the best way to report any offensive content uploaded by other players online.” It is the moderation system developed by Media Molecule and Sony in order to govern the content that player-creators produce and upload to the PSN. The system is “people-powered” (Potts, 2009, p. 299), which means that people must initiate and perform the moderation process. Participants who play the levels produced by other players must file a report (called “griefing” in the *LBP 2* community) through the Good Grief! menu included within the *LBP 2* game software (see Figure 1). By pressing a button on the PS3 controller, the player opens this menu, automatically taking a screenshot of the visible area of the level they are playing at the time. Next, the reporting player must choose a reason for the report from the options shown in Figure 1. The final step for the participant is to confirm that they do want to support the grief report to moderators.

According to Media Molecule’s community manager Sam Bennett (Sam_Protagonist, 2010) once a grief report is filed, the reported level is “placed in a queue to be checked over by the moderation teams at [Sony Computer Entertainment].” The moderation of the level remains people-powered, but is shifted from the participant who filed the report to the moderation teams who then decide whether or not the grieved level should remain available to other participants. Player-generated levels that are published for others to play are stored within the PSN and

locally on the player-creator's PS3 hard drive. If a level is moderated, it is removed from the PSN, but the locally stored copy remains on the player-creator's hard drive. Player-creators can make changes to their level and republish them to the PSN.



Figure 1. The user interface for grieving player-created levels, found within the *LittleBigPlanet 2* game.

Thus, while player-creators and other participations initiate the *Good Grief! System* through grief reports, the system's implementation remains in the hands of moderation teams that work for Sony. Participants have the chance to initially determine whether or not player-created content is "offensive" enough to warrant a grief report. And as Figure 1 illustrates, participants can choose one of seven options for classifying the levels they grief. One of those options, "Terms of Service," points to the policies governing the use of Sony's and Media Molecule's proprietary systems and technologies. There are multiple policies that govern the proprietary systems and networks that *LBP 2* player-creators may use to produce levels and characters. In the actor network of the *Good Grief! System*, several different policies contain restrictions defining the limits creative practices of player-creators. The *Terms of Service and User Agreement* (2010) governs the use of the PSN and its software, and states that participants may not upload content for which they do not have copyright or permission from copyright owners. The *End User License Agreement* (*LBP 2*, 2011) applies to the *LBP 2* software, the assets player-creators can use to produce content, and their creative practices, including the use of third-party intellectual property (IP). This agreement's restrictions concerning the use of third-party IP mirror those of the *Terms of Service and User Agreement*. In addition to these two

agreements, Media Molecule also maintains a whitelist of third-party IP owners who have informed the developer that they will “never ask [Media Molecule] to pull infringing stuff” (Robinson, 2008). This Whitelist creates room for the use of third-party IP and bypasses the restrictions outlined in the other two policies. In addition, the IP owners who have requested whitelisting are not publicly known.

These policies are network actors that establish the “morality of a setting both negative (what it prescribes) and positive (what it permits)” (Akrich & Latour, 1992, p. 261). They attempt to define the limits of the activities that network participants such as player-creators can pursue with the proprietary systems, networks, and tools provided by Sony and Media Molecule. As a result, these policies are all interlinked into a nexus of rules and regulations that govern participation in some way. Each individual policy can impact the user experience of participation. But to understand the actor network of grieving a level, they must be understood together because all are present and can be used as a means of determining whether or not a reported level should be moderated. If a participant grieves a level for containing copyrighted material, such as pictures or characters from a film, and classifies her report under ‘Terms of Service’, her report points moderation teams to these complex policies and their complex relationships with one another.

However, the Whitelist’s contradictory stance opens up room for selectively interpreting and applying the restrictions of the Terms of Service and User Agreement (TOSUA) and the End User Licensing Agreement (EULA). There are circumstances in which the Whitelist can circumvent the regulations laid out in the TOSUA and EULA. But, these circumstances are not clear. The names of whitelisted IP owners are never made public. The policies that govern participation forbid an activity on one hand, yet open room for that activity on the other. Thus, a critical component of the work of moderation is how these policies are interpreted by a moderation team and implemented through the team’s decision whether or not to moderate a level. From the view of participants, the *Good Grief! System*’s function depends on the relationships among these policies and how moderators interpret them. Yet, there is no way to know precisely when their levels might run afoul of the TOSUA and EULA’s limitations, or be saved by the provisions of the Whitelist. The user experience of moderation leaves participants within a potentially confusing contradiction, hinging on the interpretation of that contradiction by moderation teams. This lack of visibility places the *Good Grief! System* within a black box, locking the moderation process away from the view of other network actors, including the reporting player and the player-creator of the grieved level (see Figure 2). The linkages among

moderation policies are not clear, and neither is their connection to moderation teams and their decision-making processes.

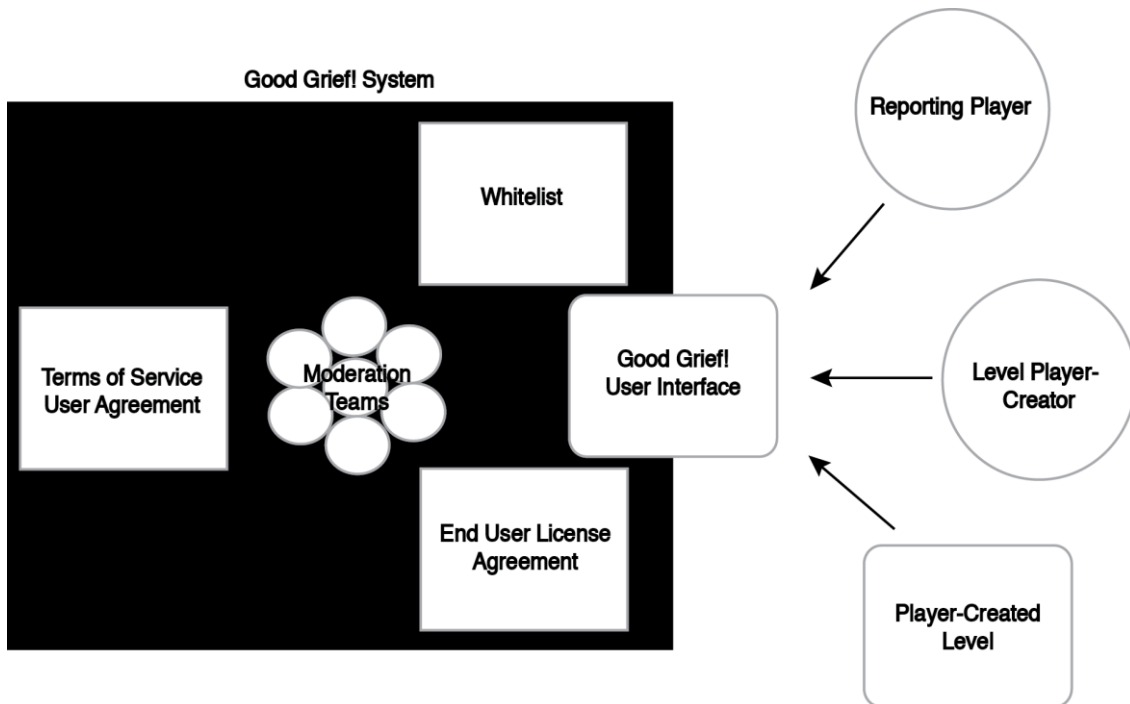


Figure 2. The actor network for the *Good Grief! System*. Proprietary actors and their relationships are locked within a black box, away from the view of player-creators and other participants.

The black box of the *Good Grief! System* becomes “an automation, a machine, one piece of equipment” through which a moderation team’s interpretations of policies and their application to grieved levels become “undisputed facts” (Latour, 1987, p. 131). The black box strengthens these decisions by hiding these processes from view. Without a clear view of how policies are understood or implemented within the black box, participants face a reduced capacity to understand their roles as creative agents. Thus, the processes within the black box are strengthened so that their impact is felt well beyond the black box, affecting the creative practices of player-creators in unpredictable ways.

Conclusions

Elsewhere, Latour (2005) has suggested that network researchers must examine both the local contingencies and the global contexts in which social interactions take place (pp. 165-172). In co-creative networks, the opacity of black boxes can be leveraged so as to hide broader global contexts and contingencies for participation while trying to force the participant to focus

on her local circumstances—what is wrong with her level that led to that level being moderated. The interpretations of policies and the processes of moderation are made impenetrable, locked away within the black box and hidden from the view of participants. By locking these network actors away, there is no view of what is happening in other critical sites of the actor network. The black box can exert tremendous influence over the participatory practices of player-creators by constraining their activities within narrowly defined, highly localized limits that are imposed from broader global contexts. Thus, while reducing the complexity of moderation for participants, the *Good Grief! System* combines the TOSUA, EULA, Whitelist, and moderation teams into a singular super-actor from which proprietary systems and networks can influence participatory practices. The user experience of participation in this space hinges on a top-down hermeneutic for determining what is appropriate practice and what is not.

Researchers examining co-creative networks can fruitfully interrogate power relationships between participants and proprietary systems, networks, and tools by tracing and analyzing the black boxes that attempt to structure participation. Black boxes can be crucial and critical network components for simplifying complex interactions. However, this simplification can also reduce the participatory capability of player-creators or others who seek to produce content. By identifying black boxes and their purposes within these actor networks, researchers can uncover the power dynamics of these relationships and more deeply understand the role of participation in the modern mediascape. In addition, interrogating these power relationships and their impact on different participatory cultures can provide critical insight for technology designers seeking to understand the user experience of participation and how to design for it.

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