9 Playing for Work

Independence as Promise in Gameplay Commentary on YouTube

Hector Postigo

On March 5, 2011 a seventeen-year-old YouTube video game commentator posted on his channel a "thank you" video for his subscribers. In his video, the "commentator" panned the handheld camcorder close to his face and began to list all the good things that had come to him from his YouTube channel. With more than half a million subscribers (and growing) and a YouTube partnership that was increasingly generating revenue, this commentator noted that he had been able to afford his first new car, save enough money to go to college and even lend his parent some cash. Beyond being a "thank you," this user-generated video was a form of "set up" film, a genre that commentators use to show to their subscribers their gaming "set ups" letting their viewership see the extent of their "geekiness" or technophilic commitment. The "set-up" that this particular commentator was showing, however, was his new car—2011 Mercedes E350 Coupe, valued at almost 50,000 U.S. dollars. Quite an achievement for a seventeen-year-old whose only source of income came from a YouTube advertising partnership. In this chapter I focus on the independence of video gamers/fans who have converted their gameplay into work. I trace material and cognitive shifts among "YouTubers" producing commentary to first-person shooter video games from 2010 until 2012 when their content became increasingly popular.

The video game industry has grown into a major entertainment business in the decades since it began in earnest with the manufacture of home consoles and games for the personal computer. During that time the industry has expanded, developing novel technologies, games and business models. Video games, once confined to the personal computer, are now on mobile phones, mobile consoles and dedicated home consoles. Like other media businesses the industry has seen consolidation. Nintendo, Microsoft and Sony, for example, now dominate the home console market. Game development, the work of making games, has also experienced consolidation. Many formerly "independent" development companies are now housed under larger publishing businesses like Activision Blizzard, Electronic Arts, Sony and Nintendo.

This chapter explores independence in relation to individual workers' experiences of creative freedom and economic reward. Independence here

is understood as an ideal that one can not only work free of a corporation's influence, alienating structures and routinized work processes, but also that one can engage in "passionate labor" that is at once personally fulfilling and financially rewarding. Such a view of independence has been important in the professional imaginary that frames game development as a career (Lange 2007; Perelman 2000; Postigo 2009). After all, if game designers and developers are anything, they are gamers first: men and women who ultimately want to turn their passions into a job. The notion of independence in one's work is not unique to the game industry but a value held by anyone who seeks creativity and fulfillment in work. Certainly, YouTube in its early years (before its acquisition by Google) traded exclusively on the notion of independent media production, leveraging user-generated content for value and positioning itself as the "celestial bullhorn" of amateur video production. No longer would video producers need transmission towers, access to satellite feeds or the transmission spectrum to massively distribute their even most whimsical creations. All they would need was a webcam and an idea. High-capacity mobile phone data towers and smartphone adoption ultimately afforded an even more expansive vision of video capture and distribution within a matrix of Web platforms, apps and mobile devices that has grown into a major media business.

Video gameplay commentators engage with the notion of independence as a "promise" for a particular form of creative labor. Video game commentators have come to call themselves "directors," the term denoting their transition from hobbyist—providing footage of their gaming experience on YouTube—to conscientious craftsperson—creating and purposefully formulating a novel entertainment experience. The use of the term "director" is primarily a custom of commentators who have been asked to join the YouTube partner program or signed content sharing contracts with Machinima.com to distinguish themselves from the wider commentary community. Their understanding of their place in leisure communities (video gamers) as labor and the "game industry" proper positions independence differently from how it has been understood in media industries. Their practices did not begin as interventions into an existing industry, but rather as corollary production to content and media platforms. Unlike other interventions in the name of creating independent media experienced in other systems (see Chapter 3 in this volume), their work was not an attempt to break the monopoly on game design or video game distribution. In other words, their form of independence did not reproduce the narratives produced by established media players, but borrowed them as raw material for their own form of entry into the industry. They created a whole new ideal of what the video game experience can be: a spectator sport.

Analysis of the most widely watched commentators, their videos, their communities and their practices, shows that while they started their

YouTube "careers" as independent producers of game-related content,
they have, over the eighteen months of research conducted for this chapter,
become deeply embedded in the processes and structures of the mainstream
mass media industries. The independence of their work belies a deep reliance
on audience tastes, platform business models (the video game industry's and
YouTube's) and the dynamics of a consumer/producer community that takes
place across digital networks, trade conferences and personal relationships.
Their foray into media production has historically been a pursuit of a hobby
with the promise of independence from otherwise alienating labor, when
revenue models became part of the video game commentary production and
distribution experience.

Video game commentary may be a singular case of media independence,
but findings are generalizable. Many of the forces that shape the valua-
tion of UGC on Web 2.0 platforms are present in the popularization of
gameplay commentary. Independence is both a promise kept and lost for
gameplay commentators. As this chapter argues, eventually some compro-
mises are made by commentators, which bring them into the orbit of the
mainstream media production ethos. As a basis for building theory about
working in digital spaces, independence is not unlike a boundary object
(Bowker and Star 1999; Star and Griesemer 1989). It straddles multiple
life worlds and provides multiple ways for making sense out of subject
positions related to work life. Within the YouTube platform and business
model, independence defines the successful commentator as private con-
tractor or entrepreneur, yet paradoxically success is precariously depen-
dent on not only producing content that will drive views, but also on
the continued success of the video game franchise that the "YouTuber" is
commentating on as well as on initial investment of free labor, a point I
draw out explicitly in the sections that follow. Within the community of
commentators, independence is a rhetorical device, an argument for why
the work is worthwhile as well as an ideal, one that motivates but that
often is not completely within reach. In the introduction to this volume,
James Bennett rightly points to the complexity of "independence" in media
production: its meaning in theory and in practice is a tapestry of visions,
technology and *techne* that orient practitioners toward media institutions
old and new, capturing them in their gravity while simultaneously afford-
ing the promise of escape velocity. If this metaphor should hold we can
envision independence as the tenuous arc of planetary orbit, and those
traversing it sometimes losing their place or maintaining it as they gaze at
stars and YouTube stardom. Gameplay commentary as an instantiation of
independence is seen by the community as convincing enactment of free-
dom but contested as institutions draw them in.

This chapter's empirical base is taken from eighteen months of partici-
pant observation in the YouTube video game commentator community.
It follows the life cycles of two of the most popular games ever designed
for console: *Call of Duty Modern Warfare 2* (*CoD MW2*) 2009 and *Call*

of Duty Black Ops (*Cod BLOPS*) 2010. The great majority of the videos produced and the community activity studied centered on these games, but it also included content for *CoD Modern Warfare 1* (*CoD 4*) and *CoD World at War* (*CoD WaW*). These last three games came before *CoD MW2* and *BLOPS*, but remained favorites that commentators played and commented on on occasion. Being a gamer myself, I feel a deep connection to those whose love of gaming is so strong that they are compelled to share recordings of their joys and frustrations with millions of others. Like other online communities, the YouTube game commentary community can have its unsavory dimensions. They have "trolls" of every stripe: racist, misogynist and homophobic discourses abound, rage is a common emotion and conflict often not neatly resolved. But there are also moments of great empathy, of reaching out and understanding, of teaching and learning. There are moments in some videos when content that paradoxically depicts playing at warfare also provides, in commentary, the most enlightened of human discourse. In those moments the YouTube game commentary community is not so different from others online or offline. The community is a complex collection of individuals in the process of meaning making, engaged in ritual, conflict and alliances. They embrace humanistic values as well as a sort of nihilism that takes the form of trolling and hate. In the case of games with large multiplayer components or online fan communities, the ethos of community becomes part of the game experience. Perhaps, as Lisa Nakamura argues, we should not hate the player but hate the game for its most egregious ugliness (Nakamura 2013). But that would divorce and absolve the platform and its design from its structuring affordances that make community dynamics part of the game experience.

The research for this chapter took three forms: in the participant observation work I watched videos, played the games, commented on videos and made commentary videos of my own. The analytical portion of the project took the form of field notes consisting of memos and notes on videos and commentary, paying particular attention to the discourse and practice of producing content that straddles leisure, hobby and professional aspirations. The design assessment of the project made note of the technical architectures within which "YouTubers" went about their routines and how that architecture afforded video game commentary production independence, but also required a form of production along lines defined by viewer tastes, the video game's popularity/commercial success and resource allocations and maintenance. Thus the gravitational pull of traditional mainstream media production practices are reproduced and inescapable. Niki Strange rightly wondered in the editing of this chapter if that pull is inexorable. I would say some elements of platform and practice cannot be ignored if YouTube stardom is desired. By ignoring their pull a *YouTuber* of any sort risks obscurity, forgoing the roar of applause instantiated as likes and channel subscribers.

MAKING YOUTUBE VIDEO GAME COMMENTARY
AND INDEPENDENCE

Video game commentary is a popular genre of user-generated video content on YouTube. At the time of this writing, collectively the top ten commentators have more than 3 million subscribers.[1] That number grows daily and their videos have been viewed tens of millions of times both on their channels and when reposted on other platforms and channels by other users. The videos themselves, be they from the established commentators or from those with smaller followings, are incredibly rich cultural artifacts. They are not only performances of expertise or gaming prowess, but also serve as performances of identity, community values, conflicts and allegiances, economy and creativity. They are a deep ritual. When the videos come from commentators with large subscriber bases they have the power to set the tone for discourse and shape the videos of other commentators by necessitating "response videos" and more commentary. Moreover, YouTube's commenting and rating system, which allows subscribers and viewers to speak to the commentators and to other community members about videos or other happenings in the gaming community, generate interactions which themselves are rich and meaningful.

Making commentary videos starts as a hobby. I've seldom heard (or read in their comments) any beginning commentator say they are doing it to make money (although perhaps secretly that's their goal long term) or that they are taking it on as a day job. But making a *CoD MW2* or *BLOPS* commentary video is not easy. An aspiring commentator will need at least an Xbox 360 (the majority of *CoD* commentary is from gaming done on this platform), but because most other commentators also have a PS3, then one might need that too. He or she will also need some form of video capture device, either an HD-PVR or a capture card installed onto a high-end PC or Mac that is connected to the console and records gameplay in real time. Last, the commentator will need the game itself (valued at near US$70 dollars) along with any downloadable content (DLC) the game company eventually releases. All summed up it's possible that a burgeoning commentator will need to make a US$5000 dollar investment up front.

Then the commentator will have to practice at the game. The overwhelming majority of commentators with large subscription bases (and even moderate ones) are very good at the game. Gameplay commentary is, if nothing else, an exhibition of great gaming skill. The overwhelming majority of *CoD* gameplay commentary is of online multiplayer team-based matches (players play against each other on teams of six or nine, not against game AI). By their own admission, commentators post only their best gameplay, but they also post their "combat records," which the game software keeps updated and then shares with an online database or leaderboard so that players can see how they stack up against others around the world. The top commentators have win/loss ratios typically above three (most players have match

win/loss ratios of 0.5 to 1) and their kill to death ratios are also high (typically between 3 or 4 where most average players are between 0.5 and 1). Together this means that the aspiring commentator has to be able to win three online matches for every one he or she loses and they have to win 80 percent of their virtual gunfights even when they are on a losing team. This is not easy at all. Even if commentators are blessed with natural skill and quick reflexes, the games highlighted here are designed to allow tactical players to win out over the naturally gifted. There are countless places to hide on a map, choke points where mobility is limited and congested and a thousand ways for a player's game character to be shot, stabbed, blown up, bombed, burned, bitten by a pack of attack dogs, shot by helicopters, AC 130s or predator drones and even blown up by a tactical nuclear device. In short, merely staying alive in the multiplayer game is an exercise in skill, luck and tactics. Excelling at the game at the level that most top commentators do is difficult in the extreme and requires lots of practice. The average top commentator will have committed between thirty or forty days of game time in a ten-month period. That's about 2.4 to 3.2 hours of gaming a week on average. Many do more than that.

There are only a few top gameplay commentators that do not regularly post great scores and or gameplay on videos. These are typically trick shot commentators specializing in in-game demonstrations of skill such as jumping off a cliff doing a 360-degree turn while getting a one-shot kill with a sniper rifle or commentators that are more like radio "personalities," deploying humor or making amusing observations about the game. The rest have to be, as the community calls them, "beasts" at the game.

Last, the aspiring commentator will have to be good at commentating. They will have to provide something other than gameplay to keep players engaged. This means they will need to give "tips or tricks" for success, develop commentary that conveys useful strategies or tell interesting stories while their gameplay runs on video. This requires a good speaking voice and style, a quality microphone so that the commentator's voice doesn't sound muffled and good video and sound editing software and skills to combine the captured gameplay with the recorded audio.[2] If the commentator gets more exposure, they might want to design a video introduction to their videos with customized theme music and graphics. Some top commentators do this, although it's not terribly widespread. Ultimately the production quality for many of the videos produced by top commentators is quite high.

Any given video takes about ten to fifteen hours to produce if not more, taking into account time to game, commentate, produce, render and post. Some top commentators post two to three videos a week. This is not a hobby for those who are terribly pressed for time or have extensive family responsibilities, thus a great majority of gameplay commentators are young and still in high school or college. A few have professions outside the game industry and families to support. These commentators are usually recording and producing late at night or early in the morning while their families

sleep or before they have to attend to their regular jobs. Independence, the ability for a commentator to choose the content and presentation, is dictated in many ways not only by their personal choice but also by the game they choose to play and the platform's various ways independent promotion of the content can be achieved. YouTube's architecture is designed to translate the video into views. It relies on the technical affordances created by its features (communication and distribution) to create social affordances (buzz around a video and community) to increase views. There comes a moment in a gameplay commentator's engagement with this practice when he or she must make a choice as to the way the content will be produced and their status as amateur, professional or "pro-amateur."

It is important to note that a significant proportion of *CoD* series gameplay commentators are men. There are some women and since this writing, their subscriber base has grown significantly.[3] The *CoD* gaming community is a gendered space and performance of gameplay is defined by the predominantly masculine identifying viewership. Women commentators with large subscriber numbers will perform a sexualized feminine persona; whether the persona is imported from their lives outside the commentary community or ascribed and adopted for the purposes of addressing masculine audiences remains to be determined in my research. To what degree either reason is the origin of those personae is expansive and liberating for women's performance of gender identity in a gendered space remains open for analysis and beyond the scope of this chapter.

A prevailing question among scholars who study hobby culture and its relation to consumer culture and capital has been: When does a hobby become work? The answer is not easy. Some say it is always work if capital can capture its value; others suggest that there is a duality to certain forms of hobbying that makes it both. For many hobbyists it is also a complicated answer. The majority seem to say that once you are paid for it, the hobby no longer is a hobby or at least the "job" aspects of the activity are so prevalent that they cannot be ignored. As the hobbyist becomes dependent on the pay or responsible to an employer, the freedom or independence of production as hobby is lost. Often game commentators who are being paid either by YouTube or machinima.com use this language.[4] They note how they have to produce a video even if they don't want to, or that other work responsibilities prevent them from producing the videos they want to make.

After the video is completed the commentator must release it on his or her channel. The platform does a lot of work once uploaded to YouTube. The video is announced in subscribers' inboxes; it is viewed, commented on, ranked, favorited, linked and so forth. To follow Sut Jhally's notion of the working audience, the video and YouTube architectures capture subscribers' clicks and views, organize them and make them available to others (Jhally and Livant, 1986). The intent is to, first, encourage community activity and, second, to translate it into more views for the video. It is in YouTube's best

interests that all videos get as many views as possible, and its technical systems are designed to facilitate that.

But the features alone cannot achieve this. Commentators must market their videos to subscribers, encourage their responses and seek new audiences, all in the hopes of increasing video views. Top commentators are motivated by both the social capital earned in the community when a video garners thousands of views (the well-studied YouTube Star status) and the financial return (Senft 2008). To this end the top commentators use Twitter and Facebook to reach out to their subscriber bases. They tweet about videos, they update their Facebook pages and they engage users. The video's success is closely tied to the personal connection that commentators have with subscribers, so commentators often organize "open game lobbies" where they invite subscribers to play a few matches of the game online, hold "question and answer" sessions via chat, live stream gameplay with subscribers watching and asking questions, and have "giveaways" (an activity that brings with it some controversy, discussed later in this chapter). The top commentators that want to garner the goodwill of the community must do all this without seeming to be trying too hard. For the community, releasing a video on YouTube and then advertising it and raising awareness about it is analogous to going out and seeking friends; if it's done too aggressively or without nuance, then the community (through comments and ratings) will punish the commentator, calling him or her out for fishing for subscribers. Often commentators will end their videos with the tag line, "If you liked this video . . . or even if you didn't, please rate, comment and subscribe . . . it helps the channel grow." Asking for feedback, any feedback, inoculates against accusations from the community that the commentator is fishing for positive ratings or subscriptions.

When this study began, the standard of content quality was not defined. Commentators could simply post gameplay to music, or rants about a particular game style, or even about their personal lives; as the genre gained more views on YouTube, that changed significantly. In many ways, those commentators who were first to market and garner viewers were in the happy position to define not only the standard of gameplay commentary but also the standard of online play. Video game culture, as it is manifested in the *CoD* online gaming community, shaped that standard of play and was shaped by the standards demonstrated by commentators. For, example, because *CoD* online play is often fast paced, players who chose to linger in locations hiding behind corners to catch opponents unawares were labeled "campers," a derogatory term used by gamers to berate players through online communication in game lobby chat and messaging. Thus commentators who exhibited a proficiency in a "run and gun" style of play were typically lauded in the YouTube community as opposed to those who "camped." If camping was a style of play that garnered harassment for any given *CoD* gamer who chose to adopt it, the style became more widely understood and rejected after YouTube commentators used the tensions in the two styles of

play as foil for their commentary. Although some top gameplay commentators do camp, they let their commentary create the entertainment value. Those commentators late to arrive to the increasingly fixed milieu of video game culture, who are not as proficient at fast-paced play, had either to find new ways of meeting the existing standard or, through their creative personae, to develop a new "hook" for viewers.

Game designers, for their part, have played close attention to these dynamics in the hardcore gamer community. Subsequent iterations of the *CoD* franchise have patently eschewed design elements that allowed users to camp, making the "run and gun" style the one most likely to bring successes through design affordances. In this way, one can argue, game design interferes with commentator independence in production. Without game design that affords plasticity in play style, commentators are locked into a particular form of content based on a defined play style if they want to garner viewers and a reputation as a gifted *CoD* gamer. One example in the design history of the *CoD* series that illustrates these design changes includes the removal of game features that allowed a player to remain unseen by an opponent team. By removing the ability to remain unseen the designers took away affordances that allowed players to "camp." Without the element of surprise, the "run and gun" strategy became the only viable option for gameplay.

Ultimately for video game commentators, what began as an exercise in leisure and creativity in video gameplay and independent media production was captured in the calculus of mass media audience taste and creation. This form of capture affords commentators an opportunity to create audience taste and production standards but ultimately locks them into a particular gameplay style and video game franchise. Commentators are not ignorant of this dynamic. They express their disappointment:

> once you start doing something for money it loses a lot of the fun it once used to have and that's where video games have gotten at this point in my life. I do them for money. A game like *Fallout New Vegas* comes along I don't want to monetize that. I want that to have the fun that it's always had. I want to just sit back and play the game.
>
> (*Wings Response to Hutch and Woody 2010*)

Whereas this particular commentator still uploads commentary, others left a potentially lucrative independent entertainment practice on YouTube because they lost that independence and joy, surrendering it to the demands of audience and pecuniary needs. If independence acts as a boundary object, it does so in the sense that it constitutes a subjective experience that straddles life worlds and helps commentators talk about their hobby and work as synergistic sides of the same coin. When that synergy is lost through the inescapability of audience taste, preference and commentator reliance on the social and material capital that YouTube affords, the boundaries between

hobby and work become impermeable in commentator discourses about their techno-practice. At times they are even incommensurate.

Intellectual property (IP) concerns have recently impacted commentator independence in the production of video game commentary. As the video game commentary genre has become more popular, game companies have taken note. A key element of copyright law in the United States calls for IP owners to assume an ever-vigilant stance over derivate uses of their valuable IP. Should IP owners not police appropriation of their IP, they risk losing their properties to the public domain. When it became evident that some commentators were developing lucrative businesses made from the public performance of gameplay, some companies used the stringent protections on public performance and use of copyrighted content to argue that YouTube and the commentator community remove some of their content. Nintendo was the first to demand that video using its content not have ads associated with it and some commentators refused to play any Nintendo games. Nintendo eventually reversed its claim and other companies publicly supported the presence of video gameplay commentary on YouTube (Futter n.d.; Gera n.d.; Reed n.d.). At the time of this writing, it remains unclear how that will impact the long-term viability and independence of video game commentators. Much of the success that some commentators have reaped has been tied to the commercial success of the game titles they choose to use for commentary. The *CoD* franchise, because it holds sales records for a number of its titles, has provided a rich content source for commentary. Using *CoD* as a platform, commentators have subsequently ventured into commentating over gameplay in lesser-known games, transforming themselves from hobbyists to independent game reviewers for new releases. Copyright problems notwithstanding, the use of a very successful platform can serve as a vehicle to maintain the viewership that incentivizes and affords the creative latitude/ independence to post gameplay of lesser-known titles.

Game companies seek partnerships with the best-known commentators, providing them with early copies of a forthcoming game and inviting them to premier events usually reserved for journalists. If gameplay commentators lose access to posting commentary over the most popular titles, these important elements of their business model will be lost. As has been the case in other instances, restrictive IP law intended to protect creators is also likely also serving as an inhibition to novel and creative business models that afford consumer participation (Cohen 2012; Lessig 2001, 2004; Postigo 2012a; Samuelson 1999).

Not long ago I sat for lunch with corporate legal counsel for a major U.S. telecommunications service provider. He turned to me and asked what should companies like his do with customers using the Web to broadcast content that can be competition to proprietary content delivered by institutional telecommunications companies. I answered, "Let them be and learn from the business models they are developing out of their media-centered hobbies." The notion of a "hobby" is important here. First contemplated by

Thorstein Veblen in 1914, it has come to be understood as a bridging prac-
tice between humanistic, community-related endeavors and the industrial
arts and capitalism. As such, the notion of "hobby," the logic of accumula-
tion and the social class strata ordered by a capitalist market system, posi-
tions leisure into its calculus (Veblen 2011, 2013). Video game commentary
as hobby is not exactly the practice of a "leisure class," but it's not removed
from values that draw *the work of hands* away from alienation and drudg-
ery. The instantiation of that hobby in infrastructure designed to extract
value for third parties like YouTube, however, slides hobby into work and
so positions it within the orbit of IP laws (meant to create markets in the
expression of ideas) and logics (meant to accumulate wealth by extracting
value from labor).

AFFORDING GAMEPLAY COMMENTARY ON YOUTUBE: THE ARCHITECTURE OF INDEPENDENCE AND ITS SURRENDER TO AUDIENCE TASTE

One ultimately cannot ignore the role of YouTube's search algorithm in
the production paradigm of video game commentary. The algorithm maps
into features that allow for production independence and creativity and also
affords sociality, capturing that dynamic in the calculus of media produc-
tion within YouTube's business model. Technological features structure how
community is performed on YouTube and how revenue is extracted and
shared.

Channel subscribers, for example, may get e-mails summarizing new con-
tent on their channels. YouTube's commenting system provides the tools for
users to post comments on any given video; the comments can be directed
to commentators or other members of the community. Commentators can
address their subscribers directly through the comments system. By afford-
ing audience maintenance, YouTube's architecture provides the means of
socially integrating channel subscribers to a "video on-demand" logic in
media consumption.

YouTube's advertising strategy on videos is also important for the com-
mentator's independence. Video creators who are part of the YouTube
Partners Program receive a share of the monies garnered by YouTube from
advertising placed on or near a video. The advertising can take the form of a
banner ad, a pre-video commercial or an in-video box ad. The system moni-
tors unique video views, ad clicks and other metrics that translate the videos'
popularity (gauged primarily in terms of the number of views) into a fee that
can be charged to advertisers and then shared with Partners. The advertising
system and the YouTube Partners Program form the central financial driver
for commentators now that the genre is established on YouTube. The system
makes clear the importance of UGC as a revenue stream. It frames the game
commentary videos so that viewers and commentators are not ignorant

of the value extraction system. Commentators talk about the system; they tell their subscribers about it and often show off the things they have been able to buy or experience because of it. The system gives life to a narrative of entrepreneurial independence among many commentators. In these moments commentators begin to refer to themselves as "directors," effectively admitting both the financial drivers and the staged nature of gameplay that is presented as natural talent. But such narratives of accumulation live in tension with other community norms, such as passion for a craft, hobbying for hobbying's sake, staying in touch with your subscribers and staying true to the values of sharing your passion for video games. This tension is so strong that many find themselves in the most awkward moments of cognitive dissonance. Often the most successful commentators (in terms of ad revenues and subscriber base) are the most vocal in bemoaning what "money has done" to the commentator community. As noted earlier, the discourses regarding productive practices when they become divergent and incommensurable cause independence to lose its bridging power between hobby and work.

Ultimately, the video-ranking algorithm is important in creating the social capital that motivates many commentators and it is important in defining how YouTube extracts maximum value from videos for both its parent company and for directors partnered in the revenue-sharing program. The ways YouTube ranks videos as relevant to a search query or eligible for presentation on its homepage is still unknown. Google, YouTube's parent company, has not made the ranking criteria public in detail. Analysts have noted that community activity around a video is a component of the ranking system (Gabe n.d.). What is known, therefore, is that search return rank is dependent on the social momentum around a video in the form of likes, comments, subscriptions and so forth. Ironically the very features that provide commentators social and monetary capital and provide them independence also lock them into the marketplace of taste and mainstream production standards—causing them to surrender that same independence and elicit the ire of game companies who jealously guard their intellectual property against these new forms of participatory culture.

Over the past decade there has been a considerable amount of work in communication, cultural studies and Internet studies that has addressed the issues raised by the promise of participatory culture for media consumers. A foundational critical work on the topic comes from Tiziana Terranova, whose exploration of "free labor" in 2000 framed much of how many critical scholars have come to theorize participation in digital environments. From Terranova's perspective, networked environments that foster and house social interactions form the framework for harnessing social practice into the capitalist logic (Terranova 2000). The outcome is a "social factory," where our social interactions are captured and monetized. Her work inspired a number of subsequent research articles on topics such as AOL volunteers, video game modifications, media work and other types of

activities that add value to online media business and technology companies (Deuze 2007; Kucklich 2010; Postigo 2003, 2009). The overall findings, if they can be summarized briefly, are that in digital networks it becomes easier to harness participation and to capture all manner of activities in the "social factory," or to destabilize work into precarious labor that is transient and contingent.

The manner in which participatory platforms invite independence in media production but simultaneously algorithmically valuates it via search results and search promotion is still in need of exploration (see Ross 2013). The means by which independently produced media (be it video game commentary or independent comedy skits like the popular Jenna Marbles You-Tube videos) affords creative and productive license while simultaneously organizing markets suggests a "crowdsourced" programming paradigm that straddles old media primetime models and contemporary on-demand models. In that way, immediately and algorithmically measured consumer tastes (by way of analyzing viewer rating, commentating and subscribing practices) can be translated into positioning a YouTube video in search results as primetime offerings. Earning a place on the YouTube home page, given its daily visit count, is not unlike earning a place on the coveted primetime programming slot in television, a position now courted by game companies and console developers (Gibbs 2014). Having that video available for viewing anytime across platforms (on a computer or cell phone) also gives it on-demand ubiquity.

Prominence, ubiquity and pervasiveness serve to foster more independent productions and, as previously noted, orient producers around creating content that will garner views. In video game commentary this has yielded some patently open machinations and manipulations of the ranking search algorithm. For example, the most reviled way of gaming (pun intended) that ranking system is the "giveaway video." In this type of video, the commentator will offer some small prize (usually a gift card for points on the Xbox Live Gaming Network) to be given to a randomly selected viewer who has rated, commented and/or subscribed. If the channel's viewership is small this can have a limited impact (if any at all); if the channel is large, the giveaway can have a significant impact, all the more so if the prize given away is large.

The case of the young man (XJaws on YouTube) who bought his first car with his YouTube earnings mentioned in the introduction to this chapter is a good example of the impact a giveaway has on a video game commentary channel. Following his car video, the same commentator purchased a large cache of valuable gaming gear, worth about US$3000, and over the subsequent weeks proceeded to give it away in his videos. To be eligible for the prize, viewers had to rate, comment on and favorite a video he produced. As a result of his giveaway and his already larger following, some of his videos appeared on the YouTube home page in the "Most Favorited Video of the Day" category and eventually in the "Most Watched Video of the Day" category. The strategy made economic sense; a relatively modest investment

in prizes would return large numbers of video views and then profit from advertisers. In response to this strategy, a very well-known commentator,[5] not in the video game commentary community, posted a video giving away prizes but asked viewers not to do anything that would increase the video rankings. His video was targeted at XJaws, noting that by doing giveaways that required viewers to favorite the video, XJaws was cheating his way into the YouTube home page and maybe even occupying that space instead of some other YouTube UGC producer who would have earned his way to the home page legitimately.

A communitywide controversy followed where gameplay commentators and other genre producers voiced their opinions on the matter of giveaways. Eventually XJaws stopped the practice. He noted that he had gotten "too much hate" and that even though he believed his practice wasn't hurting anyone it just "wasn't worth the trouble." The impact could have been significant for independent production of video game commentary content; if newcomers to the production practice hoped to accumulate views and subscribers quickly, they may have been tempted to follow his lead. But the policing of norms maintained it a less than acceptable practice.

By controlling access to large numbers of subscribers, a successful channel commentator then has a form of monopoly power over the content of others. With a giveaway, an already disproportionate market share of subscribers is leveraged to conquer some valuable space on YouTube's home page. The large subscriber base also allows for the effective deployment of ideology in service of a particular competitor. It's no accident that the YouTuber who accused XJaws of undermining the community participation system was himself an established "YouTube Star" who had in the past occupied some of the categories that XJaws was infringing on. The established YouTuber effectively used the narrative of meritocracy to remove a competitor. Independence in production of this sort, then, is not only a freedom from media industry control over content frames and production aesthetics, but also freedom from a monopoly. But it is a freedom that can be gamed as well.

Participatory culture, then, is not completely isolated from the drivers that motivate capital accumulation and orient creative practices toward production of lucrative content. Henry Jenkins has conceptualized participatory culture as a practice whose inner workings are subject to the rationale of capital accumulation, commodification and profit. Participatory culture's dynamics are also subject to internal moral economies and self-defined systems of recompense and freedom (Jenkins 2006a, 2006b). The participatory cultural view on user-generated content is more optimistic; it sees the social and technological systems that make participation in mass media production in digital environments as having potential for fruitful collaboration, user input into media discourse and independent production in our case. In the context of Starr's notion of boundary objects, it can almost always be a point of contention as much as it is a frame for understanding

epistemological validity or meaning across the panoply of social worlds that it may bridge. He or she who controls the dominant frame for the object can hold the keys to the bridge between epistemologies and social worlds. Independence is contested by the structures of hobby, copyright, capital and labor, all orbiting video games and play and media industries.

   The best way of seeing video game commentary as an example of independence in video game culture and industry is to view it from both an economic perspective and one that still sees it free of the influence of capital accumulation, social or economic. There are game commentators present on YouTube that eschew *CoD* and the genre standards established by the top commentators. They run the risk of being a whisper in the cacophony of YouTube's "youness." Whispers among a roar of voices screaming, "look at me!" That level of independence remains a risk in so much as the channels may languish and vanish, but it's also a risk that can pay dividends. A few commentators, once having gained prominence while defining or playing within established video game commentary tastes and standards, developed other content. These commentators utilize skilled performances and entertaining personae to serve as the central draw to watch commentary, rather than the popularity of a *CoD* game itself. Seannaners, a video game commentator whose subscriber base is more than 1 million, decided to stop playing *CoD* and play *Minecraft*, an independently (in the sense of outside the mainstream games publishers) produced video game, instead. *Minecraft* gained a large number of players after Seannaners started playing it for his 1 million viewers. The gameplay is nothing like the standards he helped define in *CoD*, but his YouTube persona deploys humor and a great amount of speaking talent. So his channel continues to thrive and his content helped *Minecraft* become a popular sensation (SeaNanners n.d.).

CONCLUSION

YouTube's architecture is founded on a set of communication features that create technical and social affordances. The technical affordance structure allows for the distribution of video, advertising, communication between commentators and subscribers, subscriber recruitment and retention, and community participation. The technical infrastructure also allows for the effective collection of data in the form of a log of the number of views, which, along with the advertising system, can be translated into revenue for YouTube and the video gameplay commentators and allow for independent production and distribution. While on YouTube primarily, videos also find themselves embedded on other platforms. With Twitch.tv, gameplay videos are now a live broadcast enterprise. The social affordances frame practices such as community participation, systems of subscriber recruitment and exchange and valuation, competition, participatory culture and so forth. There is a tension between those sociotechnical affordances that serve

independent production and its translation into revenue for commentators and YouTube.

The subscriber is the basic currency in YouTube road to stardom and success. Subscriber recruitment and retention translates into revenue for YouTube and into views for gameplay commentators. Commentators will share subscribers with other commentators by hosting other commentators in dual commentary episodes of gameplay. They will also subscribe to other commentators' channels and make that decision public. Caught in the momentum of reciprocity and social proof, one channel's subscribers will follow a commentator's lead and subscribe to the hosted commentator. Gameplay commentators also serve as "agents" whose work in creating gameplay and fostering gameplay audience community helps YouTube retain viewers for the genre. Once part of the revenue-sharing programs on YouTube, video game commentators are seen by the community as "stars." This moment of ascendance to YouTube stardom enables the top video game commentators to control significant social and material capital but at the cost of the freedoms they enjoyed when they were relatively unknown. Importantly, subscribers and game commentators understand the tension between their independent passionate production of content and the surrender of creativity and independence that YouTube stardom might require. "Selling out" is a common derogatory term used by the community to describe those commentators who have lost sight of the moral economy that fueled their creative appropriation of video gameplay. Despite these tensions, YouTube's revenue-generating machine marches on, and therein lies an important point: even as there is an ideological tension between independence and stardom, the views keep coming. Should a commentator lose subscribers, those subscribers will likely go to someone else who will then be offered a YouTube ad revenue-sharing partnership. Should a channel shrink or a genre go out of fashion, another will take its place and YouTube's architecture will accommodate it and get its share of cash.

From a theoretical perspective, the case of YouTube video game commentators shows some important generalizable characteristics for independence in the social mediascape that might become prevalent in other platforms for user-generated content (e.g., Facebook, Twitter or LinkedIn). First, stars matter. Whether they are seen as important network nodes or YouTube stars, those who rise, hold and grow large follower bases are key players in ensuring revenue generation. But this risks their independence as media producers when those boundaries between stardom and obscurity are crossed. Second, tools that allow for the creation of stars are a basis for rewarding independence and taking it away. Therefore digital media designs that serve dual roles are key tools for digital media industries and should be used with care by producers who seek to retain independence. Using social media distribution platforms, be they YouTube or Facebook, to distribute content that is personal or a creative appropriation of copyrighted goods is an exercise in tightrope walking. It is a balancing act between the loftiness

of stardom/creative achievement and the precipice of alienation in produc-
ing content for a mass media enterprise. The tools one uses to maintain that
balance are not of our making. They are designed to capture, to fix and to
capitalize (Postigo 2012b). As much as commentators are invited onto the
"youstage," they are only invitees and there is a trade-off.

   Game companies have taken note of the potential value that gamers offer
to the video game industry. To illustrate this, I point *to CoD BLOPs*, which
has a feature called "Theatre Mode" that records, on the game develop-
er's servers, the last 100 online matches played by any online player. These
games are viewable to anyone on the gamer's "friend list" and anyone who
has recently played a match with that individual. Theater mode allows users
to review their gameplay from various perspectives (first person, third per-
son, floating camera) as well as allows them to stop and pause gameplay
and view the game from the perspective of any other player who played that
game. The theater mode presumes that the average player will at least share
their gameplay with friends, and video game commentary commentators
have used this mode to give their commentary a dynamic feel. Regardless,
given this feature, anyone playing *CoD BLOPS* online is potentially an inde-
pendent producer of gameplay commentary.

   The future of gameplay commentary is still in the making. We are in view
of a "future anterior" (Fortun 2008). A present that promises a future for
independence, creativity and polyvocality. That promise is rooted in You-
Tube's history as a risky venture that began by affording anyone with a cell
phone and a Web connection a dynamic video distribution platform; even if
today the platform is sometimes ossifying into a mass media enterprise not
unlike others that have long occupied the mainstream. Independence in pro-
duction, then, is a promise still being fulfilled, but sometimes abandoned.
Freedom from media industry control over content frames and production
aesthetics as well as freedom from a monopoly are possible. But to risk a
pun on the topic of this volume, freedom can be gamed; it can be afforded
in platforms that whisper through their design the old media business logics
that extract value, confer it and orient production toward crafted audience
tastes and definition.

NOTES

1. The genre described here differs from the genre defined by Pewpiedie, the most
    popular YouTube vlogger in 2013, and predates his work by nearly two years.
2. Seldom do commentators comment live on gameplay. They may find it too
    distracting to talk about strategy as they play the game so the commentary is
    often recorded after the gameplay.
3. See BeatrixKiddo83ps3 or SSSniperWolf on YouTube for examples of women
    commentators at different stages of their commentator careers.
4. One aspect of game commentating I do not discuss here is commentator rela-
    tionship with machinima.com, a major outlet for video produced on game

platforms. The connections between directors YouTube and Machinima are complicated and the subject of another forthcoming article.

5. He regularly gets the "Most Watched Video of the Day," one of YouTube's predefined genres.

REFERENCES

Bowker, G. C. and Star, S. L. (1999) *Sorting Things Out: Classification and Its Consequences*. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press.

Cohen, J. E. (2012) *Configuring the Networked Self: Law, Code, and the Play of Everyday Practice*. New Haven and London: Yale University Press.

Deuze, M. (2007) *Mediawork*. Cambridge: Polity Press.

Fortun, M. (2008) *Promising Genomics: Iceland and DeCODE Genetics in a World of Speculation*. Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press.

Futter, M. (n.d.) "Tidal wave of youtube copyright claims underway," www.GameInformer.com. Available http: www.gameinformer.com/b/news/archive/2013/12/11/tidal-wave-of-youtube-copyright-claims-underway.aspx (accessed March 7, 2014).

Gabe, G. (n.d.) "YouTube ranking factors: Youtube SEO beyond views, titles, & tags," *Reelseo*. Available http: www.reelseo.com/youtube-ranking/ (accessed October 5, 2011).

Gera, E. (n.d.) "Nintendo claims ad revenue on user-generated YouTube videos," Polygon. Available http: www.polygon.com/2013/5/16/4336114/nintendo-claims-ad-revenue-on-user-generated-youtube-videos (accessed March 7, 2014).

Gibbs, S. (2014) "Microsoft Xbox One prompts outrage after YouTube stealth-marketing stunt," *The Guardian*, January 21. Available http: www.theguardian.com/technology/2014/jan/21/microsoft-xbox-one-youtube-stealth-marketing-outrage (accessed March 7, 2014).

Jenkins, H. (2006a) *Convergence Culture: Where Old and New Media Collide*. New York: New York University Press.

Jenkins, H. (ed.) (2006b) *Fans, Bloggers, and Gamers: Exploring Participatory Culture*. New York: New York University Press.

Jhally, S. and Livant, B. (1986) "Watching as working: The valorization of audience consciousness," *Journal of Communication* 36, 3: 124–143.

Kucklich, J. (2010) "Precarious playbour: Modders and the digital games industry," *Fibreculture*. Available http: http://journal.fibreculture.org/issue5/kucklich_print.html (accessed February 5, 2014).

Lange, P. G. (2007) "Searching for the 'You' in "YouTube": An analysis of online response ability," *Ethnographic Praxis in Industry Conference Proceedings 2007* 36–50.

Lessig, L. (2001) *The Future of Ideas: The Fate of the Commons in a Connected World* (Vol. 1). New York: Random House.

Lessig, L. (2004) *Free Culture: How Big Media Uses Technology and the Law to Lock Down Culture and Control Creativity*. New York: Penguin Press.

Nakamura, L. (2013) "Don't hate the player, hate the game: The racialization of labor in world of warcraft," In T. Scholz (ed.), *Digital Labor: The Internet as Playground and Factory*, 187–203. New York: Routledge.

Perelman, M. (2000) *Transcending the Economy: On the Potential of Passionate Labor and the Wastes of the Market* (Vol. 1). New York: St. Martin's Press.

Postigo, H. (2003) "Emerging sources of labor on the internet: The case of America Online volunteers," *International Review of Social History* 48, Supplemental: 205–224.

Postigo, H. (2009) "America Online volunteers: Lessons from an early co-production community," *International Journal of Cultural Studies* 12, 5: 451–469.

Postigo, H. (2012a) *The Digital Rights Movement: The Role of Technology in Subverting Digital Copyright*. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press.

Postigo, H. (2012b) "Podcast: Hector Postigo, cultural production and social media as capture platforms: How the matrix has you," *MIT Comparative Media Studies/ Writing*. Available http: http://cmsw.mit.edu/hector-postigo-cultural-production-social-media/ (accessed September 16, 2013).

Reed, B. (n.d.) "YouTube's copyright cops are coming after gamers' 'Let's Play' videos," *BGR*. Available http: http://bgr.com/2013/12/11/youtube-gaming-videos-takedown-controversy/ (accessed March 12, 2014).

Ross, A. (2013) *Real Love: In Pursuit of Cultural Justice*. New York: Routledge.

Samuelson, P. (1999) "Intellectual property and the digital economy: Why the anti-circumvention regulations need to be revised," *Berkeley Technology Law Journal* 14: 519.

SeaNanners. (n.d.) "SeaNanners Gaming Channel," *YouTube*. Available http: www. youtube.com/user/SeaNanners (accessed March 12, 2014).

Senft, T. M. (2008) *Camgirls*. Peter Lang Publishing.

Star, S. L. and Griesemer, J. R. (1989) "Institutional ecology, 'translations' and boundary objects: amateurs and professionals in Berkeley's museum of vertebrate zoology, 1907–39," *Social Studies of Science* 19, 3: 387–420.

Terranova, T. (2000) "Free labor: Producing culture for the digital economy," *Social Text* 18, 2: 33–58.

Veblen, T. (2011) *The Instinct of Workmanship and the State of the Industrial Arts*. New York: Forgotten Books Publishers.

Veblen, T. (2013) *Theory of the Leisure Class*. BoD—Books on Demand.

Wings Response to Hutch and Woody. (2010) Available http: www.youtube.com/ watch?v=sBN41wADCv8&feature=youtube_gdata_player (accessed March 7, 2014).