

## **Value transformation in the ‘let’s play’ gaming sub-culture**

### **Abstract**

*Let’s play* is a globally significant phenomenon in creative online content generation that has evolved from gaming culture. Little is understood about the behavior and motivations of community participants to generate creative content or the values they associate with their creative work. This research explores the processes *let’s play* players engage in to transform and extract value from content generation, and the roles of firms in its development. Drawing on Bourdieu’s (1989) frames of capital, this research identifies four types of value (social, cultural, economic and symbolic) and examines the processes for content creation and sharing. Findings identify a complex interplay between the forms of value together with the paramount aim of creating symbolic value for delayed economic gain. This has implications for how firms involved in developing partnership propositions (such as platforms, game asset producers, games publishers) develop and extract future economic value.

### **Key words**

Let’s play, value transformation, cultural capital, netnography

## Value transformation in the ‘let’s play’ gaming sub-culture

### Introduction

‘Let’s play’ comprises non-narrative ‘*animated filmmaking within a real-time virtual 3D environment*’ (Marino, 2004:1; Menotti, 2014). It is a contemporary social, productive and creative form within video gaming culture, where hacking and modifying content (modding) is often observed in the presumptive practices of its community (Toffler, 1980; Cova, Dalli & Zwick, 2011). The popularity of the *let’s play* phenomenon has grown significantly since its emergence in 2005 (Klepek, 2015), with a global forecast of 500M views (Statista.com, 2016). The practice has become a mass cultural endeavor, largely described as user-generated content (UGC) by game developers and publishers. It encompasses video game walk-throughs, reviews and other gameplay videos that are live-streamed over the internet to fan followers and archived in curated playlists. It has an increasingly central role in the digital economy (Terranova, 2000; Lessig, 2008) and has directly attributed billions of dollars in sales for firms such as Twitch.tv.

Its popularity is particularly evident in the high profile successes of a relatively small number of creators, who have generated millions of followers and significant incomes through revenue shares of embedded advertising and sponsorships (Dredge, 2014). Its key impact is in its ability to engender work-like digital skills among its community of practice (e.g. Payne, 2011; Menotti, 2014) through UGC encompassing what is ostensible immaterial labour (Lazzarato, 1997; Terranova, 2000; Coté and Pybus 2007). Lazzarato (1997) proposes ‘*productive cooperation and the social relationship with the consumer [which] is materialized within and by the process of communication... [and means] it is increasingly difficult to distinguish leisure time from work time. In a sense, life becomes inseparable from work*’ (1997). This is central to the concept of the social factory where the ‘*work process [has] shifted from the factory to society*’ (Terranova, 2000:33; Coté & Pybus, 2007), particularly in relation to the digital economy. Hence, labour is transformed to Kuchlich’s (2005) concept of *playbour* and Newman’s (2008) assertion that live-performed *let’s play* (Menotti, 2014), is inherently production. Despite this, little is understood about how creators or firms derive value from this. This research aims to provide empirically generated insights into the processes of value creation and transformation between community members and firms through the production and consumption of *let’s play*.

### Literature Review

Video games are interactive, immersive virtual experiences defined as ‘*...a specific kind of digital entertainment in which the gamer interacts with a digital interface and is faced with challenges of various kinds, depending on the plot of the game*’ (Zackariasson & Wilson, 2012:5). Huizinga (1949) identifies rules and performance of an act as particularly pertinent to game play. Rules become *norms*, and *performance*, being an intellectual or imaginative work, emanates from the behaviors, strategies and player-performance required in order to adapt to changing environments. Newman (2008) suggests there is an ‘*inherently social, productive and creative nature [to] these cultures that surround and support videogaming*’ (p. vii). This intimates an almost instinctual

integration of culture into self whereby language, behaviour and patterns of thinking are shared and internalized over time, shaping the ways that community members emerge and interact through practice and value is manifested (Wenger, 2000; Henri & Pudelko, 2003).

Conceptually, values are attributes ascribed to something either explicitly or implicitly by an individual or group, and may be consciously or unconsciously held (e.g., Alder & Gudersen, 2008). Adopting a service marketing perspective, value is idiosyncratically determined by customers through their consumption and use of a firm's proposition (eg., Prahalad and Ramaswamy, 2004; Vargo and Lusch, 2008; Vargo and Akaka, 2009; Gronroos and Ravald, 2011). Value is therefore integrated (or 'co-created') by the customer through their interaction with the product without which, as Gronroos and Ravald (2011) argue, there is no value. The role of the firm is to provide opportunities for customers to become actively involved in experiences through which they derive value (eg., Gronroos, 2008). Thus, within the *let's play* phenomenon, practices of the community are not so much about *value-in-exchange* between a game developer and a game player, say where a game is purchased by a player (Toffler, 1980), but is typical of the emerging shift to recognizing *value-in-use* (eg. Vargo & Lusch, 2008; Ritzer & Jurgensen, 2010), where the game becomes an operant resource for the player. Furthermore, value is highly subjective in nature (Bolin, 2012), being continually shaped and transformed by its context, and influenced by historical, sociological and geographical factors where something of value in one time-space setting will have a different value in other settings (e.g., Gronroos, 2011; Cova & Paraque, 2016; Jafari, 2017).

Drawing on Bourdieu's (1989) economic, cultural, social and symbolic capital and Baudrillard's (1969) similar conceptualization of value frames, value within the *let's play* community potentially exists as social value through networking and collaboration in co-creating content; cultural value through learning and development of advanced production techniques, and developing work-like skills; economic value through revenue generated by advertising and sales of merchandise; and symbolic value, in the ability to develop an audience and inspire them to action such as buy the game, create their own content, etc. Baudrillard's work emphasizes consumption over production and has become a popular theoretical lens through which to view contemporary media practice such as the *let's play* phenomenon (see eg., Manovich, 2001). His critique of 'homo economicus' as a counterpoint to conspicuous consumption (eg., Baudrillard, 1969) is also used within the consumer culture theory field of marketing (eg., Arnould & Thompson, 2005). Bourdieu, however, draws on 'habitus' in relation to '*a system of schemes of production of practices and a system of perception and appreciation of practices*' (1989:19). In particular, his cultural theory reflects a dual 'highbrow/lowbrow' examination of conspicuous consumption, reflecting a commodification of artistic production ('Hollywoodisation'). Bourdieu's work is therefore highly relevant here, particular in light of his discussion on the ways in which economic capital is transformed into symbolic capital through the use of cultural capital by means of artistic endeavour and education (Bourdieu, 1977).

That said, a key challenge from a firm perspective remains in capturing and transforming value generated by let's players into something of value for the firm, for example, economic value through re-integration of cultural capital. Furthermore, it is the application of skills developed through associated creative and production processes that appear to be exploited by firms as platforms for advertising (Hayes, 2008). Prosumption activities (Toffler, 1980; Fiske, 2010), not only enable community members to attain an elevated status, where symbolic value is derived from numbers of followers (converted through views of content) but also has a value as audience reach for the firm (Cova et al, 2011). Yet the development of an audience may be only one objective for a community member (Crane & Sornette, 2008). By engaging in collaborative works, *let's play* players potentially transfer value through the process of building extended reputation, providing collaborators with significant influence over a community of followers through opinion leadership (Katz & Lazarsfeld, 1955; Robinson, 1976) in a word-of-mouth marketing context (eg., Trustov et al, 2009). Furthermore, there is a continuous flow of information from game developers to the consumer through ongoing game development processes. This highlights the dual importance of mass media and interpersonal influence (Baksy et al, 2011) as resources are absorbed by each party, re-used and further value generated through an iterative process of production and consumption between firm and customer. Yet such inter-relational processes remain theoretical and value derived by creating *let's play* content is to date unexplored. This paper examines how the value frame concepts relate to the *let's play* phenomenon by generating insights into the nature of value derived by creators and evaluating how these are transformed by firms and community members.

### **Methodology**

This research adopted a mixed methods interpretivist design (Schwandt; 1999; Husserl, 1980) that enabled the subjective nature of value-in-use inherent within the *let's play* community to be explored (Bechmann & Lomborg, 2012; Geertz, 1973). Netnography was used with the filmic content and to evaluate the online, social nature of *let's plays* (Kozinets, 2015) in conjunction with semi-structured interviews (McCracken, 1988; Newton, 2010). Research drew on the prior experience and established access of one of the authors within the community as a participant observer of the focal phenomenon (Schwandt, 1999; Arneson, 2009). Access with this community is notoriously difficult and hence the experience of one of the researchers was critical in generating data for this study. Key informants within the *let's play* community were identified and approached to participate in the study (Henri & Pudelko, 2003). A purposive sample of opinion leaders was selected together with a random selection of the ten most recent examples of their creative work (see Table 1).

Table 1 Sample Description

<b>Sample</b>	<b>Method</b>	<b>Data analysis</b>
Participant observation	Observation	Field notes (appx 17 pages), thematic analysis

7 community members (opinion leaders)	Interviews, each lasting approx. 1 hour	Transcribed (appx 44 A4 pages), thematic analysis of interviews
70 <i>let's play</i> videos (portfolios of opinion leaders)	Netnography	Video content accessed online, thematic and content analysis of <i>let's play</i> content

<b>Research participant ID</b>	<b>Channel subscriber-base</b>	<b>Duration of participation in community</b>	<b>Connectivity (Number of Social networks used)</b>
P1	69	3 yrs 4 mths	4
P2	1,293,746	5 yrs 8 mths	7
P3	18	3 mths	4
P4	26	6 yrs 3 mths	1
P5	66	4 yrs 10 mths	6
P6	386,123	6 yrs 1 mth	7
P7	55	2 yrs 8 mths	4

Interviews were conducted via Skype (McCracken, 1988; Denscombe, 2014) and focused on circumstances surrounding the establishment of the participants' social media streaming channels (e.g., YouTube, Vimeo). Participants reflected on value they had derived and how this had been transformed through the creative development processes they employed. Content analysis of creative work produced by participants (streamed videos) was used to evaluate references they made to other texts, the common language and symbols they used in their creative expression (Krippendorff, 1980), as well as the cultural references related to the specific game(s) they used. The approach to community and brand engagement undertaken by participants was evaluated with reference to supporting social media used by participants (eg., Facebook, Twitter, game brand and culture related fora) identified during interviews. Although value themes were allowed to emerge through analysis of the datasets following a process of reading/viewing and re-reading/viewing interview transcripts/videos/field notes (eg., Miles and Huberman, 1994), themes related to the value concepts identified in the literature review, further discussed in the next section. The process was led by one of the authors and categories finalised in discussion with a co-author to enhance objectivity in the development of themes. The final themes are presented in Appendix 1.

### **Findings**

Reflective of Bourdieu's (1989) value forms, four key themes encompassing economic, symbolic, social and cultural values emerged comprising eight categories related to advertisements, merchandise, subscriptions, calls to action, comments, collaborations and friends, face cam and technical advances (see Appendix 1). This paper outlines the key findings in relation to each of the four value themes.

#### *Economic value*

Whilst some participants appeared to have little experience of how to transform the social, cultural and symbolic values they derived from creative and collaborative processes, others demonstrated a clear focus on economic utilization. This was evidenced through the inclusion of advertisements and promotion of merchandise in their content videos. For these participants, findings highlighted how monetary income was derived from a focus on view count, enabling participants to determine how and where they monetize their content and monitor their successes. What is interesting is that participants sought to confound established game business models by transforming their social, cultural and symbolic values into economic value indirectly. It is primarily through the development and use of their technical skills that participants created content and, in turn, participants identified that these skills could potentially be used to support the generation of future economic value through employment. For example, some used 'show reels' of their work to assist in finding jobs. In such ways, participants perceived themselves to be beneficiaries from the relatively complex tri-partite interactions involving the game, the platform and advertisers. Findings suggest a strategic approach was adopted by some participants who were aware of the preliminary steps that needed to be taken to prepare for future monetization by focusing on viewing figures and profiling their work, thereby elevating their social status, collaborations and skills and, consequently transforming economic value to symbolic, social and cultural values.

#### *Symbolic value*

Symbolic value is evidenced by the inclusion of calls-to-action and subscriber sign-up mechanisms embedded in participant videos. Unique 'idents' were used, enabling *let's players* to brand their content across multiple media platforms. Participants highlighted a focus on subscriber counts, which contributed to or indicated elevated status and influence over a target audience. This was also evidenced through membership of the YouTube Creator Academy, which strongly encourages collaboration and opinion sharing among community members. Whilst status established through numbers of followers was clearly a focus, participants did not consider their status within their target audience to be central to the success of their channels. Instead, it is the altruistic nature of content creation that determined their status. Status was also achieved through superior product knowledge, brand access and longevity in the community. Participants identified a tension with current business models of the content platforms (eg., YouTube) that aim to support transformation of symbolic to economic value. Participants predominantly seek to generate social and cultural value and transform it to symbolic value.

#### *Social value*

*Let's play* is inherently about social activities, regularly featuring groups of friends playing computer games together. They are shared for an audience to engage with and also actively promote communication between *let's players* and their viewers. Collaboration and friendship are therefore dominant themes, emphasizing that content creators are highly motivated by sociality of the environment. This is perhaps surprising, given that these content creators are often perceived to be bedroom-based 'nerds' with few friends. Indeed, the content itself is highly illuminating – it is evident that social

value was the most universally sought after form of value in this study. All participants stated they enjoyed producing the content with or for friends and themselves, but they also actively sought to create new networks through their efforts. Evidence from video content suggests that more frequent collaboration occurs on the larger channels, or those that form a part of a larger group of *let's players*. Conversely, however, there seems to be little relationship between collaboration and comments on content by community members, despite the various social networks connected to the primary content channels. Thus, whilst Facebook and Twitter were cited by participants as important social networking tools, they also commented that engagement with their community was mainly an 'in the moment activity' (eg., live streamed), undertaken whilst using a specific platform to create content. The generation of social value has thereby become embedded within the content creation process and is indelibly tied to the generation of cultural value.

### *Cultural value*

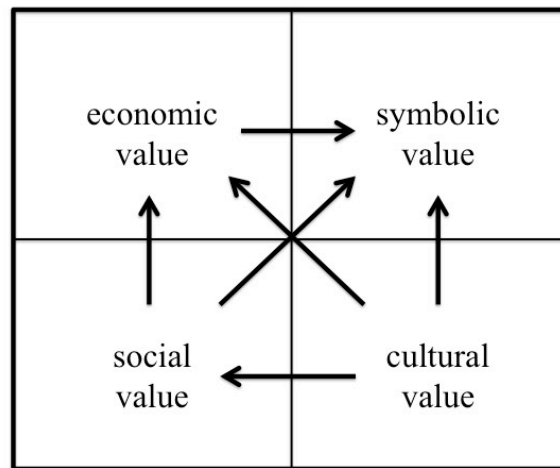
The production of *let's play* content promotes the development of work-like skills, ranging from presentation skills, cinematography, audio-visual capture and editing, storyboarding, compositing and therefore the generation of cultural value was considered a main motivating factor. This is evidenced through the use, development and statements of intent to advance participants' creative and technical skillsets. Some cited specific examples of original inspiration, demonstrating their creeping involvement in creative activities that transformed them from consumers to producers, and moved them beyond imitation to genuine personal growth as creators of content. The development process described by participants intimates that it is social value from 'in the moment activity' that transforms to cultural value. Thus, participants demonstrate that the transformation process is well understood, identifying the applicability of their learned skills to more traditional work environments such as broadcast TV, radio, or graphic design.

### **Discussion and conclusion**

Social networks serve as points of contact with a community, where members can assemble around a topic of common interest (Henri & Pudelko, 2003). Payne (2011) suggests that engagement with and consumption of content can result in the development of skills. The transition to prosumer (Toffler, 1981) is achieved by becoming an active participant in a community of practice (Wenger, 2000). The social aspects observed through collaborations in the *let's play* community, however, intimates that content is the result of a form of playbour, inherently play-like yet requiring work-like skills (Newman, 2008; Kuchlich, 2005). Findings highlight that social, cultural and symbolic values are a corollary to economic value (Bourdieu, 1989). Within the community, the actual and potential value transformations identified (see Figure 1) demonstrate a level of simultaneous naivety and sophistication among community members, as well as an emergence of the focal phenomenon. Research highlights that whilst building reputation is tied to generating income, it may not be possible to generate income without developing reputation in the process. Yet, economic value is not a primary goal for

participants. Although there is potential for economic value to be derived from content, there is little evidence this is pursued by participants. Even those expressing an interest in translating the production of *let's plays* into future employment (Ritzer & Jurgenson, 2010) claimed not to be incentivized by monetizing content. Thus, it appears that community members use the economic value they have generated and transform it into symbolic value (Bourdieu, 1989) i.e., elevated status (Dennis, 2008; Weaver, 2008; Potter, 2007). The embedding of advertising within the user-generated content, whilst technically easy for skilled individuals to achieve via the monetization strategies facilitated by firms (e.g., platforms and sponsors) was found to be of little significance from an economic value perspective. However, the presence of adverts was felt to enhance credibility and consequently social, cultural and symbolic value within the community.

Figure 1 Value Transformation in Let's Plays



*Let's play* monetization relies on the audience consuming the content, and so economic value for the creators is not guaranteed. Ritzer and Jurgenson (2010) state this is a conscious move by social networking platforms to extract value from their users, relying on unpaid UGC to add value to their platform. Whilst the direct economic impact of *let's play* is a frequent topic of discussion (Dring, 2014; O'Rourke, 2015; Hodson, 2015; Brightman, 2016), this is not reflected in the actions of participants in this research. Even though such processes may be interpreted as exploitative, it is through the production of content that community members highlight a demonstrable skillset to potential future employers, which derives for them an indirect form of economic value. Participants highlight how their passion for gaming and fun over income is of paramount importance, suggesting *let's play* is a form of playbour (Kuchlich, 2005) that makes use of work-like skills (Newman, 2008).

Bourdieu (1989) suggests that symbolic value is the acknowledgement of other forms of value as legitimate and, as such, it cannot be pursued in and of itself. In the research, the process of developing an audience and building status is evidently time consuming and

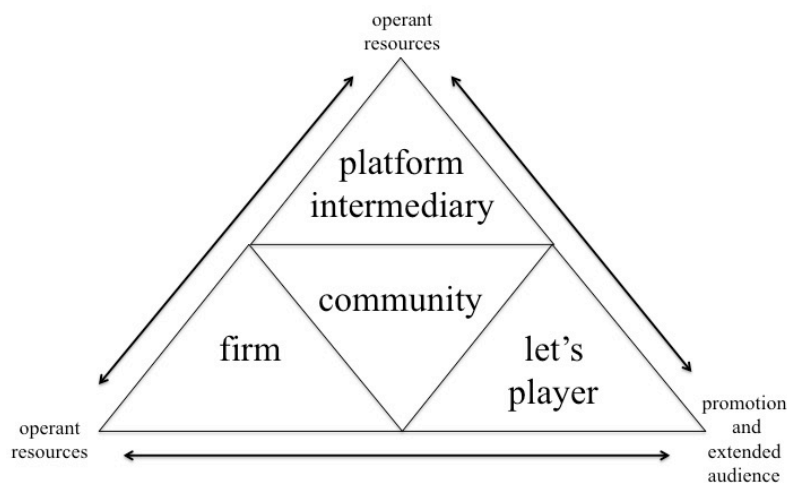


challenging but what is surprising is the pursuit of symbolic value was claimed by participants to actively destroy social value of the community. For optimum symbolic value, a two-step flow of communication (Lazarsfeld et al, 1944) was identified, whereby community members transfer credibility onto a product by featuring it in their content, effectively engaging in word-of-mouth promotion for the game (Trusov et al, 2009). The symbolic value these community members then generated, by association, preserved their elevated position. Economic and social values are developed through this elevated position in the form of collaboration and shared audiences (YouTube Creator Academy, 2015). Combining this with the social requirement for generating economic value, as explored above, then highlights the need to pursue social value before symbolic value becomes accessible. For example, the social nature of a platform means that a video with great skill (cultural value) will be shared, and collaborative videos (social value) will transcend communities. These findings provide empirical insight into value transformation processes reflected in Bourdieu's (1977; 1989) comments on the central role of culture.

### Managerial Implications

Although the economic value derived from *let's plays* and *players* contributes to firm results, e.g., from extended brand reach generated through the process of community building (eg. Lazzarato, 1997; Terranova, 2000), ultimately participants do not view firms as being exploitative per se. This intimates that a future managerial challenge for firms is likely to emanate from the introduction of new methods for social engagement that enable community members to develop their technical skills. In turn, developments will disrupt value flows between firms, players and intermediaries who provide operant resources that facilitate the creative practices of community members (see figure 1).

Figure 2 Summary of Value Flows in Let's Play



What is interesting in this study is that there appears to be a balance of power between the community members, platforms and firms in their respective recognition and use of the breadth of values generated. Whilst all seek to exploit the phenomenon, they do so for very different reasons, and therefore this appears to be a complementary process. Intermediaries, the platforms (eg., YouTube) facilitate *let's players* in developing their audience (and thus the community) but primarily act to benefit firms (as IP owners) and the platform by mediating programming, funding, cross-promotion, partner management and digital rights management (Mediakix.com, 2016). In acting as agents between the firm and the community, they underpin the value transformation process (Newman, 2008) into economic value for all stakeholders. Community members seek to generate symbolic value to support, in one way or another, their career development, whilst firms seek to use the skills of content creators, which in turn generate status, to extract revenue through associated advertising (platforms) and building audience (games developers).

Overall, it appears that platform owners may be misinterpreting how and why content creators engage in their partnership propositions and use advertising. The economic model devised by platform owners, at least from the perspective of community members, is of relatively little significance to them. From the business perspective, as new methods of social engagement are developed or technical skills are improved, and with little evidence of loyalty to the platform beyond its tripartite role with games publishers and developers, it will be interesting to observe how they in particular retain their customer base (firms and communities) to achieve a sustainable return on investment.

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Appendix 1: Value themes

<b>Value theme</b>	<b>Category</b>	<b>Description</b>
Social	Comments & replies	Comments and replies to specific comments indicate social engagement with the <i>let's play</i> community, and reinforces the connection between the <i>let's play</i> player and their viewers
	Collaborations & friends	Collaborations evidenced by multiple <i>let's play</i> participants in a single video, each of whom have their own <i>let's play</i> channel. Friends may also be included in <i>let's play</i> , but are not otherwise required to be active in producing <i>let's play</i> content. Both are evidence of social interaction
Cultural	Face cam	A 'face cam', or forward-facing camera, is used by <i>let's play</i> players to overlay their face on a video. This is a skill that is popular among more technically proficient <i>let's play</i> players as a way of adding quality, or indicating professionalism
	Technical advances	Technical advances observed in <i>let's play</i> videos. These may include chroma key (green screen), face cam, proficiency with audio and video editing, and multi-cam setups, where the video can switch between several players' video streams
Symbolic	Subscription box	The subscription box overlay on videos indicates the <i>let's play</i> player's desire to boost their subscriber-base. This highlights their aim to develop an audience, and thus their symbolic value
	Calls to action	Calls to action are where the <i>let's play</i> player encourages the viewer to 'share', 'subscribe', 'comment' or 'visit the store' to buy merchandise. This shows an attempt to exert influence over the viewer, and is evidence of symbolic value
Economic	Advertisements	Advertisements included as part of YouTube's partner programme, videos are overlaid with the advert. Economic value is derived from the cost-per-mille set by the platform (e.g., \$2/1000 views, Green, 2015)
	Merchandise	Products such as t-shirts, hats, and event tickets sold by

		the let's player to followers and subscribers
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