

In Search of a Disclaimer – Mass Creativity as a Business Model

By David Nieborg

David Nieborg is a lecturer at the University of Amsterdam and as a PhD-student affiliated with the Amsterdam School for Cultural Analysis (ASCA). His publications deal with participatory culture, game culture and virtual worlds.

In his book 'We Think: why mass creativity is the next big thing' Charles Leadbeater argues that networked groups of citizens working together in the development of products and services are able to profoundly alter current modes of organization and by doing so will alter (media) culture forever. Before delving deeper into this claim let me make clear that I agree with Leadbeater on two counts. Firstly, mass collaboration involving both mass creativity and mass participation has proven itself, at very least, to be a powerful force behind online information sharing. Wikipedia for instance is in my opinion the best invention since sliced bread. The collective and altruistic input of thousands of users who add to the popular online encyclopedia is astonishing but singling out Wikipedia as an example makes it seem as if every initiative involving mass creativity is in line with this encyclopedia's non-profit, highly disciplined structure. As a researcher, Wikipedia has become an extremely valuable tool. Many entries may be far from perfect, biased or plain erroneous, however I could not envision my academic life without it as a tool for cultural research. Secondly, it is undeniable that the web has fundamentally changed the way information is produced, distributed and consumed. Leadbeater lectures and writes about mass creativity as integral to his vision of the future. A vision and that is largely, if not solely, based on observations drawn from today's digital culture. In this essay I will draw on those same examples to arrive at a slightly different vision of the future.

So far mass creativity is shaping up to be the proverbial exception to the rule. It seems that actually only a small minority of people, whether they dig(g) a story on Digg.com or write an entry for Wikipedia.com, are actively participating. The few (academic) studies written on this subject all point towards largely idle groups watching the efforts of a few enthusiasts. Those that do become 'users' or 'creators' rather than 'consumers', participate in varying degrees. Consider Digg.com. According to the English Wikipedia entry Digg.com is, 'a community-based popularity website on technology and science articles, recently expanding to a broader range of categories such as politics and entertainment. It combines social bookmarking, blogging, and syndication with a form of non-hierarchical, democratic editorial control.' Looking at Digg.com the variation of creativity and activity occurs between the minor act of 'digging' a story, digging a comment (on a 'digged' story) or actually producing a story to add to Digg.com.

I love Bee\$ Leadbeater posed one of the most important questions regarding mass collaboration during his opening remarks at the Culture 2.0 congress. He asked, “Is mass collaboration about entertainment or something more significant?” Having studied one of the most vibrant branches of today’s digital culture – game culture, I would obviously say the former. Leadbeater seems to agree because the first example he used during his Culture 2.0 talk in Amsterdam was that of the alternate reality game *I Love Bees*, illustrating mass collaboration in action. Depending on your understanding of mass creativity and its underlying agenda for the future this example is either poorly chosen or indeed a landmark event in the evolution of online participatory communities.

The *I Love Bees* game is a relevant case study of what hundreds of thousands of enthusiasts are capable of. It is one of the first well-executed, immersive alternate reality games and at first glance seems to be all about entertainment. But *I Love Bees* is more. It is also, in marketing lingo a ‘seed’. It is the starting point of a cleverly designed viral marketing campaign for the First Person Shooter Xbox game *Halo 2*. The campaign was commissioned by Microsoft; the same company that took on open source ‘competitor’ Linux in a massive ad campaign – so much for stimulating mass creativity. The rationale behind *I Love Bees* is the same as that of a television commercial, email spam or product placement. To put up a viral advergaming as *the* prime example of mass creativity is telling in many respects.

Let me pose three additional sets of questions to further challenge the ideology underlying mass creativity. Firstly, is mass creativity as unique as it is believed to be? Secondly, what does mass participation look like in reality (i.e. who is actually participating in what way)? And thirdly, who is facilitating mass participation and why? (Is mass creativity good for democracy or is it merely good for business?) Again there is a normative dimension to mass participation that seems to be purposely swept under the carpet in the many utopist visions on the future of online collaboration. In the end mass creativity may be, as Leadbeater asserts, “good for democracy, equality and freedom” but this freedom comes at a price. Anyone familiar with the rhetoric of spreading ‘freedom and democracy’ knows that it can be a messy and complex affair.

Lessons from game culture

Mass creativity is far from new. It has been around for decades. In 1992 MIT professor Henry Jenkins wrote his landmark book ‘Textual Poachers: Television Fans & Participatory Culture’ in which he deconstructed the role of television fans within the wider media industries. Despite the lack of ubiquitous access to networked PCs, fans of television series like *Star Trek* created a lively participatory culture. Today it might be easier to be a fan and to contribute to a shared virtual fan culture. Mass creativity today is not unique; it may be more pervasive because tools are more accessible and easier to use, and due to business models supporting the grassroots practices of users. However, rereading Jenkins shows that the same barriers existing in the pre-digital era still block today’s fan-creativity. Just ask the fans of *GI Joe*, *Star Wars* or *Harry Potter*, they will proudly show you their cease-and-desist letters.

Today’s digital culture is neither user-driven, nor user-led. Innovation is not open; rather commerce is open. And what happens when grassroots practices and open web communities meet commodity culture? One of the defining characteristics of the web is its open architecture. This openness is under constant pressure and there are many (upcoming) technological and judicial obstacles. Think of discussions on network neutrality, restrictive digital rights management, repressive copyright regimes, or regulative Internet service providers. Still one can safely say that

the web today is still open to all with the right amount of knowledge and capital, (access to) a networked PC and the skills to use it.

One of the consequences of the open architecture of the web is that it allows for the production of information that can be both capital intensive, profit-oriented (market production), labor intensive (labor provided by volunteers) and non-profit oriented (non-market production). The former is synonymous with large corporations, proprietary (closed) software and paid labor, the latter with dispersed communities, open source software, and leisure. Increasingly these lines are blurring. When you walk through a busy Amsterdam shopping street these lines are clear. Locals will generally not request payment when a tourist asks for directions. Conversely, walking into a shop never leads to discussions as to whether or not their goods and services are free or paid for.

The web is a different place. Commerce and culture blend beyond recognition. There are no designated shopping streets within a web browser. Even search engine results such as Google's are displayed next to and beneath "Sponsored Links". Search results are at first glance quite opaque and ambiguous. Just type in 'web 2.0' for instance and the results show a mixture of market productions (business conferences, books on Amazon.com, and subscription magazines) and non-market productions (academics conferences, blog and Wikipedia entries). The formatting of this growing pool of information is not prohibited for anyone – both market and non-market producers can develop blogs, games, newspapers, operating systems, social networks et cetera. A lot of digitized information seems to be up for grabs. Leadbeater's model of mass creativity equals constant unpaid labor by the masses but not so much for the masses.

A disclaimer "We think, therefore we are". If mass creativity is anything, it is an economic model where unpaid knowledge workers transform their leisure time into potentially valuable information. This model may in the long run be more effective and lead to greater innovation however in the short term it is just a form of precarious labor. If leisure becomes a form of work, as Leadbeater foresees, than I would say: "We work, therefore we are". I would propose we keep thinking a while longer.

The implementation of mass creativity is a messy affair. The many manifestos on smart mobs, creative crowds and we-thinking are in dire need of a disclaimer. Company emails and social networks come with their respective disclaimers dealing with issues such as confidentiality, authorization, copyright infringement and liability. Mass creativity will undoubtedly have a significant impact on digital culture yet it comes without any warranty. The work of Leadbeater is not what gamers call 'a walkthrough', it is not a definite strategic guide to mass creativity for cultural institutions, universities, nor should it be one for users. It is a starting point for a continuing discussion about what mass participation might look like. I hope this essay could be one of the many paragraphs in such a legalese-free disclaimer written in plain language and open for all.

Acknowledgements Thanks to prof. José van Dijck and Shenja van der Graaf for some insightful discussions.