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THRESHOLDS FOR PARTICIPATION IN OPEN ANIMATION PRODUCTION: A CRITICAL EXPLORATION OF SOME ASSUMPTIONS ON PEER-PRODUCTION

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The success of Wikipedia and other large online collaborative projects has led many scholars to speak about the emergence of new forms of production that the Internet has enabled – commons-based peer production, “social production”, crowdsourcing, and produsage which all map a future of an increased user participation in media creation in a landscape of lowered technical and distribution barriers (Benkler, 2006; Castells, 2009; Lessig, 2004; Bruns, 2012). This paper presents a case which challenges the assumption of the easiness to produce media in such alternative ways, and argues for the need to nuance the celebratory discourse adjusting it tighter to the specifics of the different media genres and participatory cultures developed in such an Internet mediated landscape.

The case in focus is “Morevna” project (www.morevnaproject.org) – a Siberia-initiated experiment which has been trying since 2008 to create a feature-length open-content 2D animation film of industry quality. The case is one of two which I explore within a bigger research project on open- content media production with the aim to understand the mechanics and cultural aspects of producing independent industry-quality animation films in the domain of digital commons .“Morevna” project is an interesting case because in the course of 4 years it tried different models of alternative production. Starting with a brief period of an in-house studio based work, the project soon moved entirely online and tried an open for participation, collaborative, peer-production approach for about 3 years. After that it changed strategy again and finished with a mixture between crowdsourcing and distributed in- house production. The project had three distinguishing features: it maintained a public production blog where it shared artwork and works in progress under open licences; it reappropriated and developed further its own open-source tools for making the film; and it relied almost exclusively on volunteers due to lack of resources. Not least, it had high production values and demands for quality. After four years the project managed to accomplish only its first milestone – to produce a 4-minute demo of what the feature-length film would look like with the purpose to demonstrate the abilities of the team, the technology and to seek funding. The shift between different public production strategies and the relatively long

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production time brought my attention to the question in focus in this paper – the potential tensions and problems and ultimately - thresholds for participation in large scale collaborative projects in relation to the particular media genre produced – animated film.

Methodologically I approached the question by first doing a thematic text analysis of the public production blog located at morevnaproject.org. In parallel, I performed an online media ethnography with numerous discussions over Skype and co-working in some side production tasks with the main project leader to understand his intentions and rationale of the different production strategies. Finally, I conducted also in-depth interviews with him and three contributors to the project in order to get their point of view on the way they joined the production, and their experiences from it.

The analysis of the blog revealed that Morevna project had managed to develop a substantial public online communication infrastructure with the purpose to enable online contributions from a multitude of participants who were expected to come from the online sphere. In the same time, it also revealed that despite the technical possibilities for enabling participation the project had problems to actually get contributors leading to long periods of time when the project stood still. The qualitative interviews and informal discussions with the project participants pointed further to the following spectrum of tensions and thresholds for participation that were experienced in the project.

Open-source technology and knowledge transfer. While the use and development of open-source tools for professional 2D animation production has opened up the project towards a broader group of potential contributors – by offering non-proprietary, free of charge customizable technology - its perpetual development and improvement in the course of making the film has limited the number of people who knew how to work with it. The lack of resources to assist the knowledge transfer through for example documentation or training courses has ultimately become a direct obstacle for wider participation.

High production values. The desire to create an industry quality animation resulted in the enforcement of a power structure which filters participants so that their contributions satisfy the aesthetic and production requirements of the project. This has filtered out enthusiasts and the broader media user, limiting the range of contributors to free-lancing animators and beginning professionals from the graphics-design-illustration production branch.

Need for geographic closeness. Coordination of production tasks over email and Internet with project contributors has been recognized as cumbersome and time-consuming. This has led to the move of the production back to an in-house model complemented with crowdsourcing secondary tasks – ultimately limiting external participation even more, but resulting in increased speed and desired quality of the media produced.

Long-term commitment. Volunteer contributions helped substantially the project to develop, but their ad-hoc appearance and usually short term, unpredictable in time contributions has not been enough to bring the project to an end. This has led to the project limiting participation even more, and finishing in a more closed, place-based

production model.

The combination of all of the above has ultimately increased the degree of complexity of the project in a way which has not been realized by the participants before hand. While Morevna project remained open in terms of content and technology sharing, it has gradually become much more closed for participation. Therefore, the alternative approaches for producing animation film discussed here can be related to the concept of “collaborative media” developed by Löwgren and Reimer (2013). They argue that collaboration is a relative concept related to distinct media forms – where some forms are more suitable for collaboration than others, and “at those occasions when they are put to use collaboratively they become collaborative media” (ibid, p. 15). They acknowledge though that there exists a distinction between different media genres which represent different “forms of practice” that contain the specifics of what they can make possible (ibid). In the case of Morevna project, certain moments of the production have been more online collaboration prone – and thus more open for participation than others. However, the subjective requirements for quality and the demands posed by the media genre – animation – have ultimately been limiting for broader participation.

Based on these findings I conclude that within the sphere of alternative models of cultural production, the complexity and specifics of the media genre combined with a requirement for quality creates a dependency on two axis: time and openness, which are directly correlated with each other. The more open for participation a process, the more undefined time it takes for the production and increases its complexity. Certain media forms - such as Wikipedia - are less sensitive to these dependencies since accumulation of content and contribution happen independently and benefit from developing over long periods of time. However, for a media genre such as animation film which attains its form in a particular moment in time and exists until then in an undefined, ephemeral, fragmented state - this is problematic.

References

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