

Spectating Development: Backer Perspective on Games Crowdfunding

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INTRODUCTION

During the last decade, crowdfunding has become a significant new means to fund creative productions. In crowdfunding, cultural creators seek relatively small funding contributions from a relatively large online ‘crowd’ to fund their venture (Mollick, 2014). Especially popular among digital and board games, crowdfunding has offered many niche projects a chance to get funded by the player-customer community, with the backers typically receiving the funded product when it is eventually completed. Rather than being simply about acquiring the funded product or service, a closer look on crowdfunding reveals that backers attach many kinds of meanings and motivations to crowdfunding. Subsequently, research on crowdfunding has turned to map the various reasons backers participate in crowdfunding campaigns (Gerber & Hui, 2013; Smith, 2015). This study explores these participation motivations through a dataset from an online survey on games crowdfunding (N=426) and 114 respondents who answered a qualitative section in this survey. While a previous study (Hamari & Tyni; forthcoming) concentrated on the quantitative aspects of the data, this follow-up study is interested in how backers phrase their participation motivations in their own words, aiming to tease out emerging forms of value derived from backer participation. These answers are then contextualised and interpreted through the quantitative data. The study adopts a game production studies perspective; by seeking to better understand a newly emerged channel for independent game production and the role of backer-players in this ecosystem, it helps to round out production studies centered on more mainstream forms of game production (Kerr, 2017; O’Donnell, 2014; Nieborg, 2014). Moreover, it deepens the understanding on the cultural aspects of game production through crowdfunding and crowdfunding in general (Planells, 2015; Tyni, 2017).

DATA AND METHOD

The study utilises data from an online survey (N=426; conducted in 2016), centered on backer attitudes and motivations for participating in games crowdfunding. While the main section of the survey was quantitative and consisted of seven pages of Likert questions, this study primarily examines a qualitative section situated at the end of the survey which asked the respondent to freely “[d]escribe other reasons why you participate in crowdfunding”. Consecutively, for many it presented a chance to elaborate and reflect on

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their survey answers or for example any disagreements they had. This section received 114 usable answers, with many of them surprisingly long (from single sentences to passages several lines long). The answers were then coded and organized into thematic groups. The open section was intended to be explorative and we did not set any hypotheses to be confirmed or refuted in advance, but the preceding analysis of the quantitative data contextualized the emergence of the themes and informed the subsequent analysis. Some themes started to saturate, whereas some were more uniquely explored by one or two respondents. The responses were organized under wider frames of meaning, elaborated below.

PRELIMINARY ANALYSIS

The identified themes are summarized in the following:

Game product

For many respondents crowdfunding allows getting a product that is "tailor-made" for them. For some, the actual product quality was pleasingly high. Several saw crowdfunding offering a good deal in terms of quality, delivery or price, with a possible early access. For some, the model offers better information on the product, and how it develops over time. Some respondents brought up collecting and how they found themselves almost forced to get the campaign version of the game to get the most complete version of the game. Many also brought up rarity and uniqueness as factor.

Development

Many respondents felt that following or even spectating development through project updates is important or enjoyable. Following project updates can also offer a way to better understand or appreciate the development process. Likewise, backer-creator communication was seen as important, with some feeling that they had to actually know, or at least carefully vet the creator to back the campaign. Participating in development was identified as important, e.g. taking part in "a great thing that no one imagined".

Community

For some, crowdfunding campaigns present an opportunity to create a community around a game they like, both to interact with like-minded backers (for company and information) and to have crowd-leverage to the development process.

Crowdfunding as an enjoyable activity

Some respondents simply identified crowdfunding as a pleasant activity. Some felt that it was the right thing to do, while others wanted to find "that special gem". For some, crowdfunding felt like a hobby.

Bringing things into reality

For many, crowdfunding is about helping bring products that "should exist" into reality. For some, this was specifically about getting the kind of products they wanted, but others described more philanthropic motives, i.e. giving creators new opportunities, or endorsing arts and science. Some respondents felt specifically that it was important to support small/independent creators (e.g. in opposition to large companies who did not listen to fans).

Other notable attitudes towards the crowdfunding model

Respondents also had views on what the creators should do; e.g. in terms of how the model relates to wider game industries. For example, some told they wanted to make a difference, i.e. nurture a better kind of game culture, whereas others brought up how the CF model has become too saturated to function anymore.

DISCUSSION & CONCLUSIONS

Early analysis gives ample evidence that backers participate in games crowdfunding for many other reasons too besides getting the product, such as to follow development and to access and interact with a potential peer-community. Development, particularly, emerges as one of the main themes from the data; one interesting new finding is that some backers enjoy spectating development, giving grounds to view this activity as a newly emerging form of consumption. This finding can be seen mirroring the wider landscape of independent game development, but it also connects to the wider landscape of media culture. Whereas Bogost (2012) compared crowdfunding to shopping channels, we would compare the consumption of crowdfunding campaigns to reality TV, both in a larger sense and more specifically reality-series following different professions.

AUTHOR BIO

Heikki Tyni is a PhD candidate at Faculty of Communication Sciences, University of Tampere (FIN) and has been working at UTA Game Research Lab since 2010. Adopting a critical cultural studies perspective, his ongoing PhD work studies games crowdfunding as an alternative publishing model and a co-creative channel for gamers, with special attention paid to the emerging game industry ecosystem intermediaries. His previous work has centered on various game industry mechanisms and their consequences on game culture, including downloadable content strategies, the free-to-play model, and hybrid games and toys.

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