

# “We Don’t Sell Blocks”

## Exploring Minecraft’s Commissioning Market

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### ABSTRACT

In recent years, we have experienced the proliferation of videogames that have, as their main mode of play, the creation of in-game content. Even though existing literature has looked into various characteristics of these games, one of their aspects that warrants further exploration is the monetisation practices that can emerge in their context. Through our ongoing ethnographic study, we became aware of a vivid commissioning market in Minecraft’s creative community. Our findings point out the 3 main actors that constitute this market: the clients, who own Minecraft servers; the contractors, who handle the clients’ orders of Minecraft maps; and the builders, who are responsible for the creation of said maps. Furthermore, our work has revealed that the commodity at play is not the in-game content, as one would expect, but the service of creating this content. These findings suggest that commissioning in Minecraft – a well-organised process, initiated and sustained solely by the members of the game’s community – plays a crucial role in the game’s current structure. Moreover, they challenge the belief that content generation in gaming settings is free-labour that is exploited by the developers of those games.

### Keywords

User-Generated Content; Minecraft; Monetisation; Commissioning; Fieldwork.

### INTRODUCTION

Traditionally, User-Generated Content (UGC) in video games is connected with user-led projects that modify how the game looks and plays (Postigo 2003). These alterations to the original game are colloquially known as “mods” (short for modifications). Recently, another phenomenon that revolves around UGC is gaining momentum in the gaming industry: games that have as their core interactional modality the creation and sharing of

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in-game content, such as LittleBIGPlanet (Media Molecule 2008) and Minecraft (Mojang 2011) (Ross et al. 2012). Games such as these share many similarities with mods, as their underlying principle is to use the mechanics of the game in order to create new experiences that are wholly driven and defined by the players. Minecraft is an exceptionally interesting case, as its core gaming experience is expanded by servers that offer new play-styles by modifying the game and applying new rules to it (Christiansen 2014). Users' involvement in the development of content for the game is arguably one of the reasons why it has become so successful (Redmond 2014). However, this raises the question about the source of this creativity and how it is practiced.

Our ethnographic study revealed the existence of a commissioning market that is situated in Minecraft's creative community. Hence, the main research question that drives this paper is: *What is the social organisation of Minecraft's commissioning market?*

The emergence of monetisation and commercialisation practices in this setting warrants investigation of what constitutes those practices and how they are actually enacted. Consequently, the topics that are presented in this paper concern: the products that are traded; what is being monetised; the actors that participate in it; and, most crucially, how this whole process affects the game itself.

These are the main motivational elements that drive this research. We focus on the organisational matters that underpin the complexity of this market and on the relationships between the various actors that participate in it. Our findings provide an understanding of who these actors are, namely: the clients, the contractors, and the builders. On top of that, they elucidate the commodity that is at the heart of this market: the service of creating Minecraft maps, which are subsequently delivered to and appropriated by the clients.

## **BACKGROUND**

### **UGC in Videogames**

Creative practices inside the context of games and virtual worlds are an established matter of academic enquiry (Brown et al. 2004; Lastowka 2013; Pearce 2009). The existing literature is very diverse and paves the way in understanding various aspects that are related to UGC-based games. For instance, Duncan (2011) tries to delineate what is involved in the experience of playing Minecraft by focusing on the interplay between the survival elements of the game and its creative aspect, while Koutsouras et al. (2013) suggest that in-game performance as reaction to UGC is an integral part of playing LittleBIGPlanet. Along the same lines, Ross et al. (2012) argue that the experience of playing LittleBIGPlanet and creating content in it involves adapting to the original mechanics that are supported by the game and subsequently experimenting with said mechanics in order to expand them. Experimentation as a part of playing these games is also supported by Banks et al. (2010). In their analysis of Minecraft's gameplay characteristics, they reached the conclusion that what makes this game so compelling is the fact that players are not directed through in-game tutorials. On the contrary, they have to actively experiment with the in-game mechanics and collaborate with each other, by sharing knowledge and other resources online.

On another note, Westecott (2011) draws a parallel between real-world and digital crafting by using LittleBIGPlanet as a case-study (the aesthetics of which are reminiscent of DIY practices) and talks about the growing interest in DIY practices in the gaming

industry. Abend et al. (2015) discuss the collaborative practices that are involved in playing those games and compare the different building approaches in Minecraft and LittleBIGPlanet. Lastly, Sotamaa (2010) has looked into players' agency in this game genre, as well as the *transformative* nature of play that is at stake in their context. The notion of transformative play is of particular interest, as it refers to the type of play that can potentially affect the structure in which the activity occurs (Salen and Zimmerman 2004, 305). Most importantly though, Sotamaa hypothesises on the possibility of monetisation practices in those games as a potential development.

The link between the monetisation practices and how they affect the structure of these games needs to be investigated in detail. In the following section, we elaborate on the existing literature on productivity and play and where our study is situated in relation to it.

### **Productivity and Play**

There has been a lot of controversy regarding the notion of productivity in play. Classical game studies textbooks contend that the nature of play is inherently unproductive (Caillois and Barash 1961; Huizinga 1964). This belief is contradicted though by recent developments in the videogames industry, especially with the emergence of games that become the places where *work-like* activities are being enacted. The predominant examples of such activities are the “gold miners” in MMORPGs and the trading of in-game currency with real-world money, a phenomenon that is commonly referred to as “Real Money Trading” (RMT) (Nardi, Pearce, and Ellis 2008).

*Work-like* practices have been explored in research that focuses on understanding and defining what productivity in the context of digital games could mean. Castronova (2008) was one of the first academics to point out the monetisation of virtual goods, by focusing on MMORPGs such as EverQuest (Sony Online Entertainment 1999). In these games, players have been selling their accounts, or the in-game items they have collected by playing the game, on eBay. He argues that the capital associated with these accounts is concentrated in the skills and the equipment that have accrued to the account of the player, which require the investment of hundreds of hours of doing repetitive in-game tasks. As the assets (items and skills) that come with the account are mandatory for playing the game and achieving tasks in it, some players are willing to pay significant amounts of money for acquiring said goods and avoiding the laborious process of gathering them themselves.

Pearce (2006) has looked into this matter from a different standpoint. Leaving the monetisation prospects aside, she elaborated on the growing creative aspects that become apparent in videogames. Even though she based those arguments on her ethnographic work in There.com (Makena Technologies 2003), similar creative mechanics are abundant in games like Minecraft. Her main position is that such creativity is becoming a “viable business model,” as evidenced by the growing number of assets that are being produced by players of said games and virtual worlds. This led to the coinage of the term *productive play*, which counters the belief that games are inherently unproductive, as more and more of them incorporate means of production as well as consumption of content. The creation of said in-game content remains an act of *play*, however it involves the enactment of *work-like* practices, in the sense that it becomes achievable through a lot of effort and skill (Nardi, Pearce, and Ellis 2008). This description of *work* in games is further supported by Yee (2006), who argues that *work* in the context of MMORPGs should not be connected with corporeal practices, or any type of practice that leads to

revenue. On the contrary, it refers to a type of play that involves a lot of *work-like* tasks, in the sense that they are repetitive and demand investing a lot of time for achieving a particular in-game goal.

The monetisation practices that are discussed by Castronova (2001) and Dibbell (2006; 2007) are exogenous to the game, as they are enacted either on eBay or through individual websites that players use to do their trading. There have been some cases though where monetisation of in-game virtual items is taking place inside the context of the game. Prax (2012) has looked into one of these cases: the auction house in Diablo 3 (Blizzard Entertainment 2012). In this particular case, players have the opportunity to trade their virtual goods with other players, either for real-world money, or for other in-game items. Because of the prominent position the auction house has in the structure of the game, monetisation is integrated to the game design instead of being conducted in an unregulated manner outside of it (Prax 2013).

The aforementioned work looks into this matter from a quantifiable perspective, elucidating either the monetary prospects that are related to it, or the generation of in-game assets. Another approach to conceptualising productivity in videogames investigates the matter through the lenses of the value that players attach to or extract from playing a game. For instance, Lindtner et al. (2011) propose the concept of the *promise* of play. In their work, they elaborate on matters that have to do with the identity of the individual who is part of virtual worlds and online games. As such, production happens in the sense of *forming* identity and value through play, and not a virtual asset that has some use in the game (or can be used for trading outside of it).

Games like Minecraft fit perfectly in the notion of productive play, as discussed above. In contrast to MMORPGs, producing content in those games is the culmination of creative and imaginative work. Particularly in Minecraft's case, this practice has led to the emergence of a commissioning market that revolves around the exchange of UGC. This warrants further investigation into the matter, as monetisation in this setting has unique dynamics that warrant further scrutiny. In the remainder of this paper we discuss the basic characteristics that constitute this market, as well as the roles and the dynamics between the various actors that participate in it.

## **Minecraft**

Minecraft was first released on May, 2009, by the Swedish game developer Markus Persson as a browser-based game which was (and still is) freely available on the web. Its subsequent development had three main pivotal points: its alpha version (June, 2010), its beta version (December, 2010), and its full version (November, 2011); with each one of those introducing new elements to the game (such as new blocks and its survival mode). The first paid version of the game was the alpha, although players who bought the game in any of the versions prior to the final one were promised they would receive all the subsequent ones as free updates. Given the increasing popularity of the game, Persson founded Mojang, a game company responsible for managing and running it, which was purchased by Microsoft three years afterwards (November 6, 2014) for 2.5 billion dollars<sup>1</sup>. As of the time of writing this paper, approximately 70 million copies of Minecraft have been sold across all the platforms on which it is available (including Windows, iOS, Android, PlayStation 4, and Xbox One).

The game itself belongs to the sandbox genre of video games, as there is no direct goal the players have to achieve in order to complete the game. There are two basic modes of

play: survival and creative. In both of them, players are introduced to an empty and practically infinite and fully interactive world, in the sense that every block that constitutes it can be destroyed. The difference between the two modes of play lies in the fact that monsters manifest during the night in survival, hence players need to build shelters, craft weapons, and explore in order to survive. In the creative mode, on the other hand, there are no dangers lurking during the night and players have access to limitless resources (which, otherwise, are collected by destroying the world's blocks). Due to that, players are free to build whatever they desire by arranging the available materials in the way they see fit.

One of the biggest aspects of the game revolves around what is taking place outside of it, in the form of modifications and community servers. This particular activity has received Mojang's unofficial support, through the release of modding tools<sup>2</sup>. There is a vibrant modding community that creates tools that can be used inside the game for creative purposes, as well as server mods that apply rules to how the game can be played. This is quite an interesting extension to the original Minecraft, as Minecraft servers are built and maintained in order to run these mods and offer a diverse selection of mini-games that diverge from the aforementioned modes of playing the game (Christiansen 2014). One of the examples Christiansen mentions is that of "Minecraft Hunger Games," which constitutes a category of mini-games adopted by various servers, based on the eponymous book trilogy and film franchise. In this mini-game, players' goals are to kill each other inside a Player-versus-Player (PvP) arena, with the winner being the last one standing. Even though this is a clear departure from Minecraft's original play-style, it represents the ways in which Minecraft is appropriated in the service of other multimedia products, which promote themselves by offering novel gameplay experiences to the Minecraft community.

On the other hand, many servers focus solely on the creative aspect, by providing various tools that can facilitate building, as well as the space that players can use for their creative goals. In this paper, we mainly focus on this latter side of the community (the *creative* community), as this is where the generation of content takes place.

## METHODOLOGY

Given the social context of playing Minecraft, our approach for investigating its creative community was by doing ethnographic fieldwork. The first author of this paper spent 6 months familiarising himself with the game mechanics and building *vulgar competence* of what is entailed in the work of creating in-game content. Alongside that, he visited the main social media that are used by the community for socialising and dissemination purposes, such as Twitter, personal web-pages, Spigot<sup>3</sup>, and Planet Minecraft (PMC)<sup>4</sup> – the most used forum for the game. Furthermore, he attended an online Minecraft Convention (CubedCon<sup>5</sup>), where players advertised their work in personalised booths, networked with each other, and played various mini-games. Lastly, he undertook a one-to-one tutorial session with one of the participants of this study, where he was taught some basic techniques of building content.

In regards to the study itself, we observed Minecraft players managing their work in the computer-supported environments they use in order to build content for the game. We established communication with those players by contacting them directly through PMC and introducing ourselves and the research that we are doing. In total, 9 players replied positively in our enquiries. All of them had different roles in the creative community, ranging from being members of a team or a union, to being freelancers (these notions are

discussed in detail in the findings section). Moreover, they were experienced Minecraft builders, having spent more than 3 years creating content in the game. During our fieldwork, we were conducting informal interviews with those players, asking them questions about their work and the structure of the community, as well as the reasoning behind the in-game actions they were doing. We were communicating with participants through Skype, which was the main software they were using for their in-game communication as well. Capturing in-game action and recording the interviews was achieved by using screen recording software (ShadowPlay<sup>6</sup>). All of the participants are anonymised and references to the teams they worked for are intentionally avoided, as the individuals would be easily identified through them. For that reason, we use identifiers every time we refer to them (P1, P2, etc.).

The analysis of our data draws upon Strauss' (1985) take on division of labour and aims at unpacking the work taking place in Minecraft's commissioning market. For the goals of this particular paper, we look into the actors that participate in this market and try to delineate their roles in doing the work of creating a Minecraft map. By doing that, we intend to uncover the commodity that is at stake, what is monetised and how is it brought about. In that regard, our analysis utilised thick descriptions (Crabtree, Rouncefield, and Tolmie 2012, 117, Ryle 1968) to explicate the nature of the work and what makes it naturally accountable to those who do it.

## SUMMARY OF FINDINGS

What we present in the following sections are the key aspects that constitute Minecraft's commissioning market; the commodity in this market; and the actors who are involved in it. The commodity that is monetised is not the map that is delivered to the clients, as one might expect, but the *service* of building this map. Regarding the actors, they are broadly split into three categories: the clients (those who are interested in acquiring Minecraft maps), the contractors (those who receive the clients' interest) and the builders (those who do the actual work of building in-game content).

## IDENTIFYING THE COMMODITY

The key aspect of this whole business is the commodity that is being monetised. Even though it is rational to assume that this would be the actual maps that are handed to the clients, in reality what is sold is the builders' time. Minecraft's End Users Licence Agreement (EULA)<sup>7</sup> specifically prohibits the monetisation of in-game material. Because of that, our participants made it quite clear that they *"do not sell blocks"* (P3) but their time; the commissioning market revolves around the monetisation of the service of building in-game content and delivering this content to the clients.

*P2: "We sell a service. Because, I mean, we are not really selling the blocks, we are selling us doing a favour for someone."*

This means that the builds that are being created through the builders' efforts are free items that do not belong to someone in particular. The service, on the other hand, of creating those builds is something that belongs to the individual offering it, hence it can be monetised without violating Minecraft's EULA. This raises the question of the legitimacy of this work and how the clients can trust the builders and expect that they are not going to reuse the material they were paid to deliver (by, for instance, giving it to another client for money). As was disclosed to us by our participants, the creative community is relatively small and *"close-knit"* (P8) and taking advantage of the clients (or being taken advantage of by them) would become known to the rest of the community

and would have negative consequences for the individual who “scammed” the client (and vice-versa).

*P2: “It’s a lot about trust in the community. I mean, the customers are gonna trust me to not send it to anyone else. The community is so tight that everyone knows each other and people talk a lot. And so if I would sell it on to someone else’s will, I would be very unpopular, because obviously this guy has paid to get it custom-made for him and his server.”*

The map in Figure 1 is one example of the type of work that is usually commissioned from the builders. Even though what was delivered to the client was this exact build, the builder (who, in this particular case, was a freelancer and a member of a union – these concepts are discussed in the following section) received payment they considered to correspond to the amount of time they put in for its creation (approximately 10 hours). The aspects that are being considered while pricing a build involve its size, its detailing, and the builder’s experience. Most of the builders we talked to informed us that they use set prices for particular build sizes. For instance, the build in the figure below is constituted of 100x100 Minecraft blocks, which would put it in the price range of approximately \$100. Besides the aesthetic aspects of the build, builders are asked to include some other elements that are mandatory for gameplay purposes, such as storage room areas for keeping in-game items safe. Even though some of these aspects are expected by the builders, prices can go up if the clients ask for multiple secondary elements to be included in the final build.

*P7: “If they want a shop area that’s floating and a large statue over here, you can understand how much more time it’s gonna take and probably cost more.”*

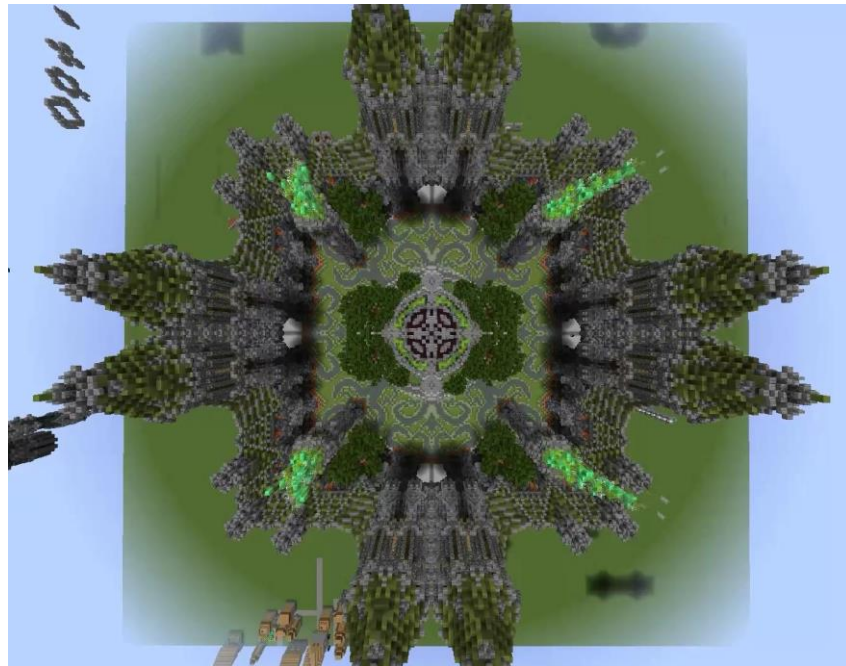


Figure 1 An example of a commissioned map

The above pricing parameters are relevant to the time that is needed for the completion of a build. Another interesting bit that needs further elaboration though is related to how the

builder's experience has a role to play in valuing a build. The professional builders we followed during our fieldwork spent many years building in the game and developing their knowledge and skills in a variety of creative manners. For them, working in Minecraft is an artistic endeavour and for that reason they charge more for their services, due to their experience and their particular skillsets.

*P7: "Over time, since I have gotten better, I started charging more for 100x100."*

*P5: "It is art, it requires a ridiculous amount patience and dedication and it takes years to learn the skill to even build what we build."*

*P6: "I feel I do pretty well on my easter-eggs and my ideas for how I want the layout of builds are gonna be."*

## **ACTORS**

The main actors that participate in Minecraft's commissioning market are the clients, the contractors, and the builders. In this section, we elaborate on each one of these actors, by explaining their roles and goals in the market. We need to point out that we treat "actors" as individuals who are capable of actively taking decisions during any stage of the commissioning process. These actors are sometimes part of an organisation (a team, or a union), as discussed in the following subsections.

### **Clients**

Clients are those who are willing to pay real-world money for the acquisition of Minecraft maps, and they range from Minecraft server owners, to YouTubers and corporate organisations. Even though all of them are interested in the same kind of product (Minecraft creations), their goals differ. YouTubers, for instance, use the maps for streaming Minecraft gameplay, while corporate organisations utilise Minecraft as a platform for advertising their products (which are depicted on the maps they purchase). Of all of these clients, the most prominent one for Minecraft's community are the server owners. Servers offer mini-games and alternative ways of playing the game through their networks, covering the needs of the players that want to have particular experiences through it. On top of that, they provide to those players the means of practicing their creativity, as they offer access to building grounds and tools that are not available on the original and unmodified version of the game. For those reasons, servers are considered a crucial aspect of the community and even referred to as "*the backbone of Minecraft*" (P7). Their unique selling point is offering those novel ways of playing the game, while having an income through micro-transactions. The micro-transactions themselves come in many different forms, ranging from in-game assets (such as better weapons, or in-game currency) that players can use in order to become more competitive while playing, to skins for their in-game avatars. Similarly to the professional builders, the game's EULA imposes limitations to server owners too, as it is specifically prohibited to profit by directly using the game itself. Due to that, server revenue is based on making their services available in the form of donations that are used for covering the costs of running the server, instead of payment for granting the right to have access to it. Due to their direct involvement in the development of Minecraft's community, server owners constitute the type of clients that we investigate in this paper.

*P9: "I think MC is a community. It has a lot of sub communities, but I also think that those 'communities' are a different kind than a server. It's like a country and a city and a house. I wanted to fix things in houses [servers], so I built my own."*



*P2: “Servers is like a super big thing in Minecraft. There are a lot of servers and they also make a lot of money. This is because they use micro-transactions. You get the game for free and you can choose to pay for extra stuff, whether that is aesthetics, or something that’s gonna make you better in the game.”*

Part of hosting a server involves having the actual server and running a modified version of Minecraft on it. What the players see though when they log in is not all this infrastructure, but the actual Minecraft world where play take place. As this is the main aspect of the game that players interact with, it needs to be appealing and aesthetically-pleasing in order to catch their attention and make them want to come back and play on the same server again. This is where the commissioning process comes into play; server owners acquire eye-catching maps by contracting commissioned work from the professional builders in the creative community.

*PI: “And then that feeds back to the build teams, because to make the servers popular, those servers need quality maps and Minecraft environments that are designed and built by professional or, you know, people good enough to do it.”*

## **Contractors**

We use “contractors” as an umbrella term to refer to those that receive the commissioned work from the clients and subsequently delegate building tasks to those who are going to accomplish them (the builders). Based on our study (and according to the terminology used by the members), contractors can be divided into three subcategories: team managers, union members, and freelancers. Their main responsibilities include assigning the commissioned work to the right builders and making sure that the final product is going to be delivered on time. On top of that, and depending on their role (team manager, union member, or freelancer), they have to manage the distribution of money across the builders involved in the commission, based on how much work they put into it.

Even though these roles can be distinct from each other, there is high level of correlation between them. As such, being a team manager does not exclude one from being a freelancer, or member of a union. What follows is a description of what is entailed in being any of these three types of contractors, as well as the difference between a building team and a union.

### *Team Managers*

There is a variety of professional building teams in the community, all of which have their own builders working under the team’s name. The purpose of a building team is to address the needs of the clients with regards to acquiring professionally made Minecraft maps. Team managers are the individuals who are responsible for running the building team and generating commissioned work under their name, as well as overseeing the progress of each project and reassuring their on-time delivery to the clients. Therefore, they are the ones that liaise directly with the clients and discuss all the building details for the job, which are subsequently delegated to the builders.

*PI: “it’s a sole trader-ship under my name and then I subcontract the individual builders so I will have the contracts with the clients and then I will distribute the money to our builders.”*

*P8: “The guy who owns the server generates [work] under the [team’s] name.”*

Distributing the money is done proportionally to the builders' involvement in the project and the time they had spent on it. However, managers keep a portion of the total amount for covering various managerial costs, as well as the practical costs of maintain the server where all the building activities are taking place (such as the fee for hosting the server). We need to point out that this is a different type of server, which needs to be distinguished from the play servers that were discussed above. Building servers incorporate in-game tools that are not available in the original version of the game, and their owners may even pay professional programmers to develop specialised tools that only they have access to. These are examples of the costs that are covered by the revenue that is produced through the commissioned work that managers bring in.

*P2: "When we are doing the build, I look at who is most active and then I just deal out the money percentage wise to, like after how much I saw that person do or like how much they did in reality."*

*P8: "We take a percent commission for running costs and management costs but they end up with 60-70% of the total payment. Just goes straight into their pocket."*

### **Union Members**

Unions are a rather interesting entity inside Minecraft's community, which stands in distinction to teams and freelancers. They are intertwined with the commissioning process and their goal is to provide a place where sharing of commissioned work can happen freely, without having intermediaries such as the team managers. They emerged out of the builders' need to be independent from the hierarchical structure that exists inside building teams and be transparent about the way money distribution is handled.

*P3: "Many build teams practice the process of percentage cut from a commission by the team manager under the guise of having directed and collected clients. Many of us didn't take kindly to that idea. So as a Union we practiced the motto of "fair pay for fair work". We, as the builders no longer need nor desire middle men to handle negotiations between clients and contractors. As such all work is processed directly through the artists themselves. How the Union functions as a group under favourable circumstances is that each individual of the Union seeks out their own commissioned projects."*

In the case of the union we followed, jobs could be shared between anyone who was a member of that particular union. The members used a type of web-based pin board – Trello<sup>8</sup> – for sharing commissions between each other, in case one of them did not have enough time to finish it themselves. The process simply involved pinning the commission on their shared Trello board, while providing all the necessary details for accomplishing the work (the type and the size of the build, the deadline for delivering it, and occasionally its price tag).

*P7: "If I can't do something, then I know that if I put it up here, somebody will claim it and at that point I can say to my client that we are going to get your work done on time. And anybody can do that."*

In this particular case, the contractor of the job is the person who initially had the job and made it available to the rest of the union. The member who claims the job is the builder responsible for working on it, while the contractor remains responsible for monitoring its progress and delivering it to the client, after its completion. Money distribution is

clarified right from the beginning – usually in the advertisement of the work on Trello – so that builders can know exactly what percentage of the total payment is going to be given to them. This comes in accordance with the very reason of being part of a union, which is to have direct access to commissioned work and receiving the payment that is proportional to the work that was put in creating a build.

This type of sharing is beneficial for both parties (contractors and builders) as the former can have the work that is commissioned from them done without letting clients down, while the latter have easy access to commissions, without the need of having their own client base. However, contractors retain the rights to the work they “*outsource*,” therefore they are the ones that use it to promote themselves on the various websites that are commonly visited by Minecraft players (like PMC or Spigot). Even though credit is given to the builders, the promotion is mainly attached to the contractors’ name, which reveals the power dynamics that are at play in the community and the importance of being able to have direct access to commissioned work.

*P4: “The one that provided the work keeps the promotional aspect of the build, which means in general that the one that built it gains the lion's share of that specific project, but the revenue over time will be mainly kept by the one that is actually outsourcing the commissioned work.”*

### **Freelancers**

Builders usually belong to a particular build team and work on the commissions that are assigned to them by the team managers. However, it is possible for a builder to be completely independent, by working on the projects that clients pass directly to them. As such, freelancers are both the contractors and the builders of their own work. Instead of relying on a team or a union to find commissioned work, they are being contacted directly by their clients – or being recommended by other contractors – and discuss the details of the work with them.

*P4: “Most of my clients are actually returning clients. I am someone who uses Skype a lot in order to communicate. My Skype is available 24/7 and that is available for one reason: because I know that if one of my old clients needs something, they can just pop me a message and I will reply to it as soon as possible, which means that you skip the step of requiring you to be found.”*

Freelancers have the merit of receiving the total amount of payment for a particular commission. However, being completely independent from any type of organised entity in the community (either teams or unions) involves “*greater risk*” (**P4**). The freelancers we happened to talk to and observe doing their work told us that their approach is generally riskier, as it is viable only when there is an established client base they can rely on. As was mentioned above though, the level of correlation between those roles is so high that usually freelancers are already part of an established union or even a team, while maintaining their own client base independently and occasionally outsourcing the commissions they cannot handle due to time constraints.

### **Builders**

This is the most general category of actors in the community. Anyone who can work on any type of project is a builder. The only characteristic that distinguishes a builder from the rest of the actors in the commissioning business in Minecraft is the fact that they are

the ones that get the work done. During our observations, we became aware of the fact that it is possible for all types of contractors (team managers, union members, or freelancers) to partake in building tasks and work on their own commissioned work. Still, some of our participants were sole builders, neither having their own client base, nor leading a team. On the contrary, they were relying completely on teams or the union to get access to commissioned work.

## **DISCUSSION**

This paper looks into the monetisation and the professional practices that stem out of Minecraft's creative community. Existing literature in this field looks into similar practices in two types of digital environments: video games (mainly of the MMORPG genre) and virtual worlds (such as Second Life (Linden Lab 2003)). There are a number of differences between the professional practices in said games and those that were revealed through our work, which are going to be discussed here.

First of all (and most importantly) what is occurring in Minecraft is something that stems out of the creative practices that are afforded and reinforced through the game. In the aforementioned examples, the tasks that lead to monetisation practices are repetitive, involving no creative thinking at all. In MMORPGs for instance, the matter that is being monetised has the form of virtual items that are earned through routinised activities, such as the continuous killing of specific enemies in hopes of receiving a rare item dropped by one of those slain. Value, in this case, is attached to those items mainly for the time needed to acquire them, paying tribute to the anecdote "time is money" (Castronova 2008). Furthermore, these items are created by corporate environments that run these games and aim at being used for purposes related to playing. Minecraft creations, on the other hand, are not something pre-defined by companies and corporate environments, but something that stem out of the imagination, creativity, and hard work of those involved in their production. The value of the item that is at the centre of the transactional practices that take place inside the creative community is a culmination of these characteristics and hence is attached to the creators themselves, instead of the virtual items (the Minecraft maps) that are traded.

Where value is placed raises the question of what drives the demand in each of these cases. In MMORPGs, as suggested by Castronova (2001), demand for virtual goods derives from the scarcity of said goods inside the game. This scarcity is an outcome of the design of the game, which gives rise to an environment where players' time and hard effort is rewarded, while also leading to an in-game player hierarchy based on their experience and equipment. In Minecraft's case though, there is no scarcity of existing goods, as no goods pre-exists; demand revolves around the acquisition of intriguing maps that are created by professional players, which are subsequently used in various mini-games. The commissioning market is built around this demand and aims to satisfy it with the continuous production and provision of aesthetically-pleasing builds.

On top of that, we should consider the ways in which the game is affected through these practices. Christiansen (2014) has already talked about the vibrant developing and modding activities that expand the play possibilities of the game through mini-games. Building on this we need to take into account what is achieved through those practices. As pointed out by our findings, Minecraft servers, which run those mini-games, play a fundamental role in the success and maintenance of the parent game. Besides that though, the content that they house and subsequently offer to the players is created by the builders of the creative community, who are commissioned by the servers for the delivery of their

creative work. This extends the existing literature on the effects of monetisation practices in similar gaming environments, where it is argued that monetising content can potentially detract from the player experience (Prax 2013). Lehdonvirta (2005) explains that this might become the case due to breaking down the hierarchical achievement and progress in the game because of the exogenous acquisition of in-game items through RMT. Minecraft's case is quite different; the commissioning market has emerged from the community of the game and they coexist in the same ecosystem. The community has reached the point where the growth of the servers is proportional to the growth of the commissioning market; as long as there is the need for new ways to play through the game, there will be the need for professionally crafted Minecraft maps. As such, the growth of the game is intertwined with this market.

It has to be added that direct comparisons between monetisation practices in MMORPGs, virtual worlds, and games such as Minecraft are quite difficult to make, as all of them offer different affordances and have different goals (in terms of the experience they provide). However, the work that is taking place in Minecraft (and could happen in other similar games) is something that contributes to the existing literature and furthers our understanding of how these practices can emerge and affect the development of this particular game genre. Existing literature on productive play has already discussed the notion of *work-like* activities as part of the nature of play in digital games. What becomes evident through our work though is that play in creative games such as Minecraft is not constrained only to *work-like* practices that lead to the production of intricate in-game builds; it can be transformed into an entirely viable and profitable revenue model that players appropriate, in a grassroots manner, to their advantage, as one of the main interactional modalities of said games (the creative aspect) becomes *work*. This expands our understanding of what is achievable through this particular genre of videogames and of the possibilities players can have through them.

On that note, there are also some interesting comparisons that can be made between the commissioning activity in Minecraft and modding culture. The community that revolves around modding shares many similarities with participatory culture, as in both of them participation and contribution to the community is valued more than actually earning a living out of the work of supplementing a "text" (Jenkins 2006; Poor 2013; Postigo 2003). This view is so strong inside this particular community that Valve's recent initiative of giving monetisation privileges to those who distribute their mods through the company's platform (Steam) was countered by the community, which eventually led to the retraction of said initiative<sup>9</sup>. Even though there are instances of employability being acquired through developing mods (Postigo 2007), there is the general belief that work on the construction of mods is free labour, which benefits the companies that develop games, but has no direct (if at all) monetary profit for the modders themselves (Postigo 2003). Kücklich (2005) has coined the term "playbour" in order to refer to the notion of companies capitalising and profiting from the unwaged work of modders, since the latter create content that belongs to the former, in exchange of the right to experiment with the game's assets. We argue that the *work* practices that are enacted inside Minecraft's creative community diverge from this notion and do not bear the negative connotations assigned to it. Even though a significant part of the continuing success of the game is indeed attributed to players' involvement in creating content for it, they (the players) have deliberately extended the modalities of play that can be supported through it and, in parallel, have found ways to financially support those preferences, develop personal skills and generate income through the commissioning market. In contrast to modding's case,

this is something that the players themselves have endorsed, as a community, and has not been countered or prohibited by those that own the game.

Even though Minecraft shares many similarities with other games of the same genre (such as LittleBIGPlanet), we believe that its open and easily-modifiable characteristics have led to the current structure of the creative community and its commissioning market. Without this infrastructure, server owners would not be able to initiate the sort of business they are running and commission professional builders to do the work they are doing. It is hard to say whether the immense success of the game occasioned the flourishing of this type of business, or the establishment of commissioned work made the game so broad and diverse. What is definitely the case though is that this market has become one of the core features of Minecraft's creative community.

## **CONCLUSIONS**

What we present in this paper is a study of Minecraft's commissioning market. Our fieldwork revealed the actors (namely, the client, the contractors, and the builders) that are part of this market and appropriate the game in order to run their business. Furthermore, we elaborate on the relations between those actors for accomplishing the monetisation of in-game content generation. We also pinpoint that the commodity in this market is not the content itself (the Minecraft maps), but the time players spend in creating said content (the service of building Minecraft maps).

Our contribution to the existing literature of UGC and games lies in discussing the implications of the commissioning market for the structure of a game such as Minecraft. We argue that this market is intertwined with Minecraft's current form and plays an important role in the expansion of Minecraft servers and the emergence of new ways to play. In comparison to MMORPGs, it is a market that is situated inside the game's creative community and instead of undermining the player experience the game offers, it enriches it through the production of professionally made content.

Furthermore, commissioned work in Minecraft diverges from the notion of playbour – the belief that in-game content production, as well as modding, is unwaged labour – since Minecraft players manage to monetise their work in an organised and professional manner. Through this process, they do not only have revenue, but they also participate in the extension of the ways Minecraft is played.

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## **ENDNOTES**

1 Microsoft acquired Mojang (and Minecraft) for \$2.5 billion by Markus Persson on 2014: <http://www.polygon.com/2014/11/6/7167349/microsoft-owns-minecraft-mojang-acquisition-closes>

2 Mojang's official announcement of supporting modifications:  
<https://help.mojang.com/customer/en/portal/articles/979212-minecraft-mods>

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- 3 Spigot is a forum that Minecraft players use for promoting their work and networking with each other.: <https://www.spigotmc.org/>
  - 4 Planet Minecraft is a website that is used by Minecraft players as the main hub for hosting a portfolio of their work: <http://www.planetminecraft.com/>
  - 5 CubedCon is an online annual Minecraft convention, where players and building teams promote their work on dedicated booths: <https://cubedcon.com/>
  - 6 ShadowPlay is Nvidia's desktop screen capturing application:  
<http://www.geforce.com/geforce-experience/shadowplay>
  - 7 Minecraft's End User License Agreement specifically states that the game's content cannot be used for commercial reasons:  
[https://account.mojang.com/documents/minecraft\\_eula](https://account.mojang.com/documents/minecraft_eula)
  - 8 Trello is an online pin-board application, which offers the means to manage projects collaboratively: <https://trello.com/>
  - 9 Valve's effort to monetise modification was rejected by the community:  
<http://www.polygon.com/2015/4/27/8505883/valve-removing-paid-mods-from-steam>

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