Tampere University

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Games Crowdfunding as a Form of Platformised Cultural Production

Effects on Production, Reception and Circulation

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Games Crowdfunding as a Form of Platformised Cultural Production: Effects on Production, Reception and Circulation

Heikki Tyni

Islalle, Saimille ja Marja-Kaisalle

PREFACE

This dissertation work has been a long journey into global game industry practices, games crowdfunding and backer communities with their various motivations. What started out with a three-year research funding from the University of Tampere Doctoral School has taken over five years of my life. Doing research can be awfully lonely at times, something that has become even more evident during the COVID-19 pandemic and social distancing. For many of us, including me, this has presented a lot of challenges in how we are able to organise our work and ourselves in the absence of physical work communities. As such, this work has been a long personal journey into how research work is practiced, a process that will no doubt continue for a long time after writing this.

I have played digital games since the age of six. Since the age of 13 I have been interested in the creation processes of cultural work, first by creating myself and then by analysing others create. At the age of twenty, I was drawn to filmmaking, and my journey led me to study audio-visual media culture in the University of Lapland. For multiple reasons, my studies concentrated on participatory cultures in digital gaming. When researching the background for my bachelor's thesis, I started to bump into names like Frans Mäyrä, Olli Sotamaa and Annakaisa Kultima who seemed to be the top game scholars in Finland, stationed at Tampere Game Research Lab. I then moved to Tampere to study in a master's programme in game studies, and would you believe my luck: almost immediately, I was able to start working with these top scientists. After working here at Tampere for more than a decade, some of that magic still lingers here in these hallowed halls of game research.

I first grew interested in games crowdfunding around 2014, when more and more independent game projects started to seek project funding through Kickstarter. For a short while, it seemed like these player-funded projects could really make a difference in the global game console industry. This was a time when Nintendo's Wii U console, launched two year earlier, was failing badly against Sony's and Microsoft's consoles, largely because most large-scale game productions by third-party publishers were avoiding the console. Suddenly, however, it seemed like many games crowdfunding projects would support the Wii U to a degree that the machine would actually have some new games to play. This seemed like a turn that signalled a

revolution in terms of how the traditional game industry had worked for decades. This kind of potential for industry transformation informed the first stages of my research on games crowdfunding.

In the end, crowdfunding did not save the Wii U, but my research interest had already drifted to other phenomena within games crowdfunding: the dynamic relationships between the campaigns and the backer communities, how developers were able to manage (or not) the long development period leading up to the launch, the connections between games crowdfunding and game collecting cultures, and so on. Games crowdfunding is still a burgeoning phenomenon that keeps on leading an interested researcher into all kinds of alley ways and underground lairs. Indeed, there seem to be princesses in almost *all* the castles.

For helping me make this dissertation a reality, I want to specifically mention a few people. First and foremost, I want to thank my instructor Professor Olli Sotamaa. His wisdom, guidance and patience during my long research process has been more or less vital in getting me across the finish line. During my decade+ stay at Game Research Lab, Olli has constantly supported me both as a teacher and a colleague, and also as a friend, in a way that has meant the world to me. I also thank him for co-writing several articles with me along our shared path in researching game production, one of which forms a part of this dissertation.

Special thanks go to Professor Mia Consalvo and Dr. Anthony Smith for pre-examining the dissertation and for their supportive and insightful comments. I also want to extend special thanks to Professor David Nieborg both for his inspiring research over the years and for agreeing to be my esteemed opponent.

Other important collaborators and colleagues that hold a direct significance for my work include Juho Hamari for our writing partnership on one of the included articles and for teaching me a lot about quantitative research; Frans Mäyrä both for his wise guidance over the years and his leadership within Game Research Lab; J. Tuomas Harviainen for his kind help in general and specifically in regards to article publishing and the doctoral process; Kati Alha for her kind help in all work things imaginable, and for being secretly the real bedrock of Game Research Lab over the years; and Jan Švelch for his friendship and collaboration in teaching and research on the topic of game production.

I am also deeply grateful for Tom Apperley both for his professional support and his friendship in and out of work during these last two years. Tom also deserves my gratitude for kickstarting the Write Club. Without this shared space a lot of hard work and good conversations between colleagues simply would not have happened. Consequently, I thank the entire Write Club community for camaraderie and

support, including the “regulars”, Elina, Niklas and Kati, and also the more casual participants like Usva, Jaakko, Sabine, Mila and others. I also thank all the other colleagues now working at Game Research Lab, or who have passed through the Lab over the years: thank you for all our collaborations, for all the support and the good conversations.

Outside the academia, there are a number of people who have had a special significance on my thinking over the years, and it would be impossible to name all of them here. Thank you all, you know who you are. I do, however, want to specifically thank Pasi for his lifelong friendship and all the conversations that always seem to stretch longer and longer, going back all the way to Rantsu; Antti for his friendship and camaraderie during the all the ups and downs during my time at Tampere; and both Hannu and Raimo for always being there when I needed it, filled with seemingly endless understanding and wisdom.

During the time that it has taken to complete this work, I have been funded by the Tampere University Doctoral School, and employed by the Centre of Excellence in Game Culture Studies funded by Academy of Finland. I am very thankful for this support.

Lastly I want to thank my family: my mom Liisa and my sister Maria for being the biggest inspirations in my life; my daughters, Isla and Saimi, the lights of my life, for teaching me so much about myself; and my wife, Marja-Kaisa, for the love, patience and endless support in all areas of my life.

ABSTRACT

The recent decade has seen an increasing number of 'game production studies', with critical examinations on industry structures, production models and labour issues. This study critically examines an emerging area of independent production of digital games, games crowdfunding. Asking funding directly from 'backer' audiences, game developers have been able to sidestep the publishers of the traditional game industry. However, crowdfunding has had a myriad of repercussions for everyday game work, production networks, and how games are received and sold, amongst other things.

Through a mixed-methods approach combining elements from game studies, critical political economy and cultural studies, this dissertation conceptualises games crowdfunding as a production logic that affects every area of game production. In getting rid of the traditional publisher, developers need to acquire a lot of new competencies and shoulder a lot of work previously handled by the publishers. Backers are found to possess several other roles beyond just funding and hold a wide variety of participation motivations beyond just acquiring the crowdfunded game. As projects have become more professional, many backers treat crowdfunding as a form of pre-ordering.

In the discussion, games crowdfunding is contextualised as a form 'platformisation of cultural production', with game development and economics revolving around a central platform and intermediaries connected to it. The production model is revealed as a site of tension between alternative production opportunities, precarious game work, commercialisation and emerging user opportunities. Further studies are needed to understand the full gamut of games crowdfunding, including small campaigns.

Keywords: Game industry, crowdfunding, production logics, platformisation, game production studies

TIIVISTELMÄ

Viimeisen vuosikymmenen aikana akateeminen pelitutkimus on keskittynyt kasvavassa määrin pelituotannon eri osa-alueisiin, kuten teollisuuden rakenteisiin, tuotantomalleihin ja työolosuhteisiin. Tämä väitöskirja tutkii kriittisen tutkimuksen lähtökohdista tuoretta riippumattoman pelituotannon aluetta, pelien joukkorahoittamista. Pyytämällä tuotantorahoitusta suoraan tukija-faneilta, pelintekijät ovat kyenneet ohittamaan perinteisen peliteollisuuden veräjänvartijat, pelijulkaisijat. Joukkorahoituksen käyttäminen vaikuttaa kuitenkin monilla tavoilla pelintekijöiden päivittäiseen työhön, tuotantoverkostoihin ja pelien myyntiin ja vastaanottoon.

Yhdistellen pelitutkimusta, poliittista taloustiedettä, kulttuurintutkimusta ja monimenetelmällistä metodologiaa tämä väitöskirja käsitteellistää pelien joukkorahoituksen 'tuotantologiikaksi', joka vaikuttaa pelituotannon jokaiseen osa-alueeseen. Sivuuttaessaan perinteiset pelijulkaisijat pelintekijöiden täytyy omaksua monia uusia taitoja ja tehdä paljon ylimääräistä työtä. Tukija-faneilla on projekteissa monia muitakin rooleja rahoittamisen lisäksi, ja tuotantoprosessiin osallistutaan monesta muustakin syystä kuin vain rahoitettavan pelin saaminen. Samalla kun pelien joukkorahoituksesta on tullut standardisoidumpaa ja ammattimaisempaa, monet tukija-fanit ovat alkaneet suhtautua siihen ennakkotilaamisen muotona, joka aiheuttaa ristiriitoja joukkorahoittamiseen liitetyn altruistisen eetoksen kanssa.

Väitöskirjan diskussio-osiossa pelien joukkorahoittaminen kontekstualisoidaan osaksi 'kulttuurisen tuotannon platformisaatiota', jossa pelinkehityksen ja talouden osatekijät kytkeytyvät keskuksena toimivaan alustaan ja sen sidosryhmäverkkoon. Pelien joukkorahoitus paljastuu tutkimuksessa ristiriitaiseksi alueeksi, jossa yhdistyvät epävarmat työolot, lupaukset emansipatorisesta tuotantomallista, kaupallistumisprosessi ja uudenlaiset käyttäjien osallistumismahdollisuudet.

Avainsanat: Peliteollisuus, joukkorahoittaminen, tuotantologiikat, platformisaatio, pelituotannontutkimus

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ORIGINAL PUBLICATIONS

Publication I	Tyni, H. (2020). Double Duty: Crowdfunding and the Evolving Game Production Network. *Games and Culture*, 15(2), pp. 114-137. First published online December 27, 2017. https://doi.org/10.1177/1555412017748108
Publication II	Tyni, H. & Hamari, J. (submitted). Why do we crowdfund? An empirical study of consumer value in games crowdfunding.
Publication III	Tyni, H. (2018). Spectating Development and Other Backer Perspectives on Games Crowdfunding. *Proceedings of DiGRA Nordic 2018*. DiGRA Nordic 2018 - Subversion, Transgression, and Controversy in Play (Nov 28-30, 2018), University of Bergen, Norway.
Publication IV	Tyni, H., & Sotamaa, O. (2019). Game Retail and Crowdfunding. In D. Herbert & D. Johnson (Eds.), *Point of Sale: Analyzing Media Retail* (pp. 75–90). Rutgers University Press.

1 INTRODUCTION

Since the turn of the millennium, digital games have become a $150B industry which only seems to be growing (Newzoo 2019). Hand in hand with this growth, the academic attention of games research has turned to the rising variety in game production logics (Kerr 2017). Next to the monolithic mainstream game industries, there is a huge game industry landscape populated by tiny independent developers and producers. These game workers tap into a wide spectrum of financing schemes, production models, distribution channels, middleware, and earning logics that can be considered more or less as an alternative to the mainstream game industry production logic (Kerr 2017; Nicoll & Keogh 2019). One of the major trends in the global games industry has been digitalisation. While digitally distributed free-to-play and location-based games played on mobile devices have now become the largest segment of the mainstream game industry (Newzoo 2019), the same technologies of digital distribution fuel the modest-sized work of countless independent game developers and other everyday game makers (Young 2018). There, games of all different sizes are created to make ends meet, often in precarious work environments, always locally, and most often for global audiences.

Together with the rising cultural relevance of game culture, academic research on games has increased in number and scope. Even though we have a fairly decent number of PhD dissertations on game culture, game creation and games themselves, game studies can still be considered a relatively new field of research. We have just now begun to see game studies be broken down into more specialised sub-fields, one of which is the research area concentrated on various phenomena connected to the production of games. Current academic writing and some research consortiums have discussed this sub-field using the concept of 'game production studies' (e.g. Jørgensen 2017; de Smale et al. 2017; Keogh 2019; Sotamaa & Švelch 2020). Influential researchers in the area have critically examined matters such as industry structures (Keogh 2019; Jørgensen et al. 2017), production models and logics (Kerr 2017), studio practices (O'Donnell 2014; Whitson et al. 2018) and labour issues (dePeuter & Young 2019; Ozimek 2019). It can therefore be said that academics in

the field of game research have now woken up to a realisation that games are not made in a vacuum.

This study concentrates critical attention on one emerging area of independent production of digital games – games crowdfunding. In crowdfunding, a project creator asks for relatively small funding amounts from a relatively large online group of funders, or 'backers', for the development of an idea, often a product or a service. Crowdfunding emerged in force in the beginning of the 2010s, drawing from several techno-cultural trajectories that are still ongoing. The most significant of these are the advent of social media networks, a growing participatory culture (Jenkins 2006), crowdsourcing, and the platformisation of cultural production (Nieborg & Poell 2018; Gillespie 2010). From fairly early on, games became the poster child of the crowdfunding phenomenon, pioneering new practices around the model and acting as the centre stage for both some of the most spectacular successes, and also some of the most bitter failures. The emergence of crowdfunding was a particularly good fit with the independent game development scene that emerged in force in the mid-2000s. Asking for development funding directly from the interested audience allowed game developers to bypass the traditional gatekeepers of game production, publishers and platform holders. As an alternative form of financing game development, crowdfunding has had repercussions for everyday game work, production networks, backer audiences and game selling, amongst other things. Similar to other game production study areas, it holds an interest in critically expanding our understanding of what contemporary game development really is. Furthermore, while games crowdfunding is often located on the fringes of the 'mainstream' game industry, the techno-economic trajectories that power it tell tales of the future of cultural production in a very wide sense.

Independent game production can be seen to be at the heart of games crowdfunding. As independent game developers have adopted crowdfunding with many projects consecutively struggling to make ends meet, questions of work-life balance and labour conditions have arisen. One of the key reasons to study games crowdfunding, and how sustainable game production actually is on different levels, is to pay critical attention to the social organisation of game work (Whitson et al. 2018). As professional producers and publishers have seemingly disappeared from this aspect of game production, the functions they served "holding together the heterogeneous parts of the game, the team and the surrounding community and industry are now more important than ever" (ibid.). Crowdfunding serves both as a lens, and epitomises many of the fulfilled and unfulfilled promises of emancipated

independent game production, prompting consideration of what the 'indie game revolution' should have been (and what it was not).

In gathering and connecting with niche audiences, crowdfunding made it possible to start creating games that earlier might have been deemed too risky, either in terms of financial sustainability or content. For the gaming audience at large, the cultural importance of games crowdfunding can be seen in a very tangible way as reviving several 'dead' game genres, such as the isometric computer role-playing game, the point-and-click adventure, and the 2D non-linear adventure platformer (i.e. the 'metroidvania' subgenre of video games). Furthermore, the model has helped launch several game projects with transgressive or feminist themes, going a step forward in normalising such content in the cultural imagination of the wider game culture. On the other hand, in the crowdfunding model – and especially in games crowdfunding – the role of users has been accentuated in terms of the game creation process. This in turn has highlighted how researching the crowdfunding model further adds to our understanding of both the cultural construction of games, and what it means to consume games in newly emerging contexts.

While crowdfunding has been researched fairly well in business and consumer studies, there are relatively few studies on the cultural aspects of crowdfunding, and very few on the crowdfunding of games (e.g. Smith 2015; Lolli 2018; Planells 2017). The crowdfunding phenomenon can be considered to be 'live', meaning that it is (still) evolving constantly, and for example digital games crowdfunding has in a relatively short time gone through several phases in terms of public interest and economic outcome. This keeps necessitating new studies in order to grasp the position of the model within the larger game development scene, and also makes games crowdfunding a very interesting topic of inquiry in terms of how many of the emerging practices used within the model reflect the wider game and cultural industries in revealing ways. At the same time, this quick pace of transformation makes it impossible to offer any kind of all-compassing account of the cultural relevance of the phenomenon. In order to give a sufficiently broad perspective on game production through crowdfunding, this dissertation adopts a mixed-methods approach that combines elements from game studies, cultural studies, and the political economy of digital games. As one of the first large-scale studies on games crowdfunding, an overarching aim of the study is to serve as an explorative introduction to the wider area of crowdfunded game production. In terms of methods, the study combines case study data on large games crowdfunding campaigns with quantitative and qualitative survey data on the motivations and attitudes of the backer communities. The concept of 'platformisation of cultural

production' (Nieborg & Poell 2018) is used to contextualise and direct the framing of the study. In the results, games crowdfunding is conceptualised as a 'production logic' (Kerr 2017) of its own.

Following on from the multi-faceted nature of the games crowdfunding phenomenon, I believe this dissertation to be useful on multiple fronts. First, it helps game production studies inaugurate a new area of research – games crowdfunding – in terms of how games can be produced, revealing both the idiosyncrasies of this area and new approaches for researching it. In the absence of holistic studies on the topic, this study largely builds the basis for future research on games crowdfunding, particularly in terms of political economy and backer motivations. When we understand the phenomenon of games crowdfunding better, we can better understand what it is to be an independent game creator in 2020.

Second, this study serves game studies in widening the scope of what we consider to be 'game culture', for example by introducing new forms of consumption related to games, and the cultures that surround them. Both notions serve to connect this study into ideas put forward by T.L. Taylor in highlighting the decentralisation of the 'game product' (and game as a discreet entity) in contemporary game cultures (Taylor 2009; Consalvo 2017). As a result, the focus of this research shifts away from the games themselves (both crowdfunded and others), to the context and phenomena surrounding the game products, namely the creation of games. Here, the making practices and surrounding phenomena are seen not only as important, but often even more interesting than the game product itself. One implication of this research motivation is the emergence of 'game production studies' as a semi-recognised field of research.

Finally, the current study feeds into the wider research field of cultural labour in general and cultural production through crowdfunding in particular, for example through revealing practices that have spread from game crowdfunding to other crowdfunding categories and practices that serve as a condensing mirror for issues such as the 'relational labour' of cultural workers (Baym 2018; Whitson et al. 2018).

Following these viewpoints, this dissertation looks at three areas of games crowdfunding: the production of games, the user reception of the model, and implications of the model for the retail culture of crowdfunded games. As stated earlier, an all-encompassing account of the phenomenon is beyond the grasp of any one study. At the same time, there are so few studies concentrated on games crowdfunding that a large research work focused on such an unexplored area needs to at least try to form a more holistic understanding of the phenomenon. A key focus of this dissertation is therefore to examine games crowdfunding in a broader sense,

asking: what else is there in games crowdfunding besides games, crowds and funding? To elaborate on this, I move on to lay out a more accurate framing of the thematic areas, points of interest and limitations of the study.

1.1 Framing of the study and research questions

In addition to game studies, the main research approaches used in the thesis originate from cultural studies and the political economy of media, which is then applied to the political economy of games. Following these research traditions, key sites of inquiry for this dissertation are:

- **Production environment** – production structures within crowdfunding of digital games, specifically production networks and production logic.
- **Player environment** – crowdfunding backers as consumers, co-creators and players, and their more nuanced motivations.
- **Circulation environment** – institutions of game retail and how they are affected by the context of crowdfunding, as an example of the interplay between production and consumption.

To lay out the connections between these sites of inquiry, Figure 1. displays the thematic areas of the dissertation as four domains of interest – organisation of the production environment, game work, backer culture and selling crowdfunded games. These thematic areas overlap in terms of the three sites of inquiry of production, player, and circulation environments – as for example backers also end up doing production work and game selling, and developers are forced to move beyond the core competencies of game development to sell games, and face backers on a one-on-one level on social media, user forums and at conventions.

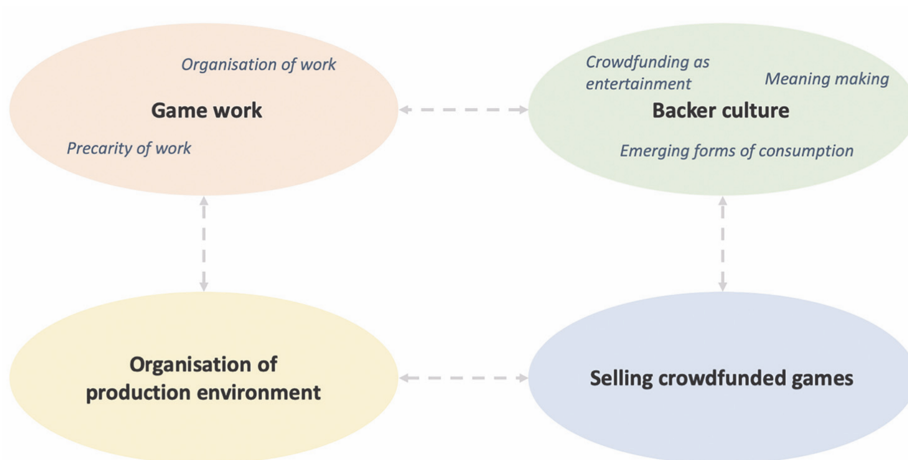

Figure 1. Thesis thematic areas

In terms of developing new theory and due to the background of the political economy of games and cultural studies, one aim of the thesis is in developing the theoretical tradition of 'game production studies'. Most of all, the aim is to elaborate on what the emerging field of game production studies should focus on, informed by an examination of games crowdfunding. Rather than being an established field of research, game production studies is a collection of current research perspectives within game studies, focused on the creation of games and the cultures surrounding these processes. It is also important to note that many of the key texts within this tradition (such as *Digital Play* by Kline et al. 2003) have been identified as belonging to 'game production studies' only after the fact, and often by others (instead of the original authors – even if they would probably share the sentiment). On the other hand, this relative ambivalence in defining the field reflects a similar problem still hindering the wider field of game studies (Mäyrä & Sotamaa 2017).

Thus, the field of game production studies is constantly evolving, with new areas being connected to it. For example, within the political economy of games, key areas of interest include working conditions, labour rights and the blurring of boundaries between work and play. However, all of these aspects are redefined and renegotiated as the cultures of game work evolve due to the introduction of new technologies that augment the organisation of work. New production contexts are constantly creating new production structures, and the more vertically, horizontally and diagonally integrated these new contexts are, the more all aspects of the surrounding culture – such as reception and circulation – are affected.

Until now, games crowdfunding has been studied mostly from a business studies perspective, with a focus on entrepreneurship and consumer research aspects. I aim to show that it is highly beneficial for game production studies to study games crowdfunding due to its nature as a condensing lens that captures the current production environment. Due to the centrality of the platform in the crowdfunding environment, this dissertation contextualises the phenomenon of games crowdfunding through the concept of the platformisation of cultural production (Nieborg & Poell 2018; Gillespie 2010). There are prominent studies that have concentrated on the largest media platforms owned by Google, Amazon, Facebook and Apple (e.g. Gillespie 2010; Srnicek 2017; Nieborg & Poell 2018), and this dissertation aims to contribute to this area of research by looking at crowdfunding platforms. The processes of platformisation increasingly shape game development, networks of production, how game work is organised within those structures, the agency of players within those structures, and how development, players and the processes of circulation are affected by platforms employing network effects and two-sided markets moving towards markets with multiple intermediaries. The aim here, is to illustrate how in crowdfunding production logic, the platformised production of games is making game development more democratic and emancipatory in some aspects, while at the same time failing in others.

In terms of narrowing down institutions of games crowdfunding, the dissertation focuses on Kickstarter as the largest crowdfunding platform for game projects in the western Anglo-centric world, here referring to the United States, Canada, parts of Europe and Australia. Therefore, this dissertation does not account for non-English language crowdfunding platforms (such as Ulule in France) or non-Western cultures such as China and India (which might also have large games crowdfunding scenes due to them having healthy game development cultures), or to development cultures and crowdfunding platforms in the Global South and other developing countries (also with possibly very interesting crowdfunding projects). Focusing on Kickstarter also frames the study on reward-based crowdfunding, as Kickstarter mainly focuses on that model. Other modes of crowdfunding outside of reward-based crowdfunding are, however, elaborated in the 'Key phenomena' sub-chapter. I also mention and briefly discuss some other platforms that have hosted game projects, especially Fig.co – a dedicated, curated crowdfunding platform for digital games, built as an evolution and betterment to Kickstarter by high-profile Kickstarter game project creators.

Drawing from the framing laid out above, the research questions of this dissertation can be presented as three sub-questions that correspond to the three

results chapters of the dissertation, and one main over-arching research question that ties together the sub-questions:

- Sub-questions:
  - How does the traditional games production network change when the crowdfunding model is used?
  - What kind of motivations and attitudes do backers have for participating in games crowdfunding?
  - What kind of implications does crowdfunding have for the current culture of game purchasing and consumption?

Together, these sub-questions help to form a more coherent picture of the games crowdfunding phenomenon and answer the main over-arching research question of this dissertation:

  - How does employing the game crowdfunding production logic affect the production, reception and circulation of digital games?

It is worth pointing out that these research questions – and the more general framing of the study – is partly shaped by the journals and other publication avenues chosen for the four research articles that form the core of this dissertation. Whereas Article 1 is a fairly typical cultural studies journal article, Article 2 was eventually written as a business studies article, largely guided by a business studies-oriented co-author who handled key parts of the associated theory in that context. Subsequently, Article 3 was written as a follow-up to Article 2, elaborating on the results presented in the article, however this time adopting a cultural studies focus and presented at a game studies conference. Finally, Article 4 was published as a chapter in a book with a media studies focus and a more essay-like structure.

1.2 Theoretical context

This dissertation is a combination of games studies, political economy of the media, and cultural studies perspectives. Figure 2 displays games crowdfunding as being at the intersection of the three disciplines. Here, game studies is understood as an

interdisciplinary field (Mäyrä & Sotamaa 2017; Deterding 2017) that allows multiple research fields and methodological approaches to be combined, while keeping games and the culture surrounding them at the centre of the research. The centrality of games (for example, in how we define what a game is - see e.g. Stenros 2017) has been a fixture of game studies since the beginning. Perhaps contrary to this thematic, this dissertation mainly focuses on game production. Rather than claiming that studying game production is not core to game studies (i.e. not pre-occupied with the games/texts/products *per se*), this dissertation assumes a stance where game production is seen to be an all-important area of digital games, that informs the end result and the playable form of games (see e.g. de Smale et al. 2017). Through such an approach, this dissertation organically connects to and expands on the discussion on the target of game studies, and more specifically, how that target moves from the game itself to the surrounding context (Taylor 2009; Consalvo 2017) and the creation of games. By doing this, this dissertation also adds to the construction of the emerging field of game production studies.

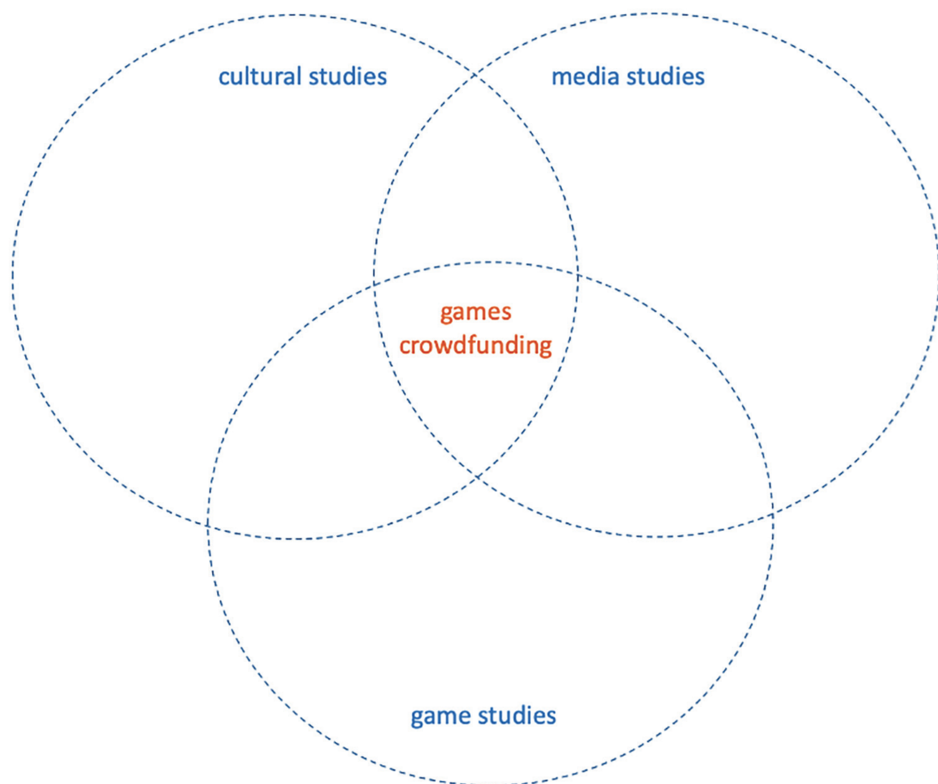

Figure 2. Thesis disciplinary areas

In terms of its situation within the existing theory on cultural industries, this dissertation concentrates on games crowdfunding as a 'production logic' (Kerr 2017), and examines its effects on the industry and backer-audiences in terms of their attitudes and meaning-making concerning games crowdfunding. It is both a study on the political economy of digital game production and an enquiry on the crowdfunding backer audience that draws inspiration from cultural studies. In terms of production, the dissertation is concerned with several key phenomena of the theoretical political economy line of enquiry, mostly in the tradition of Aphra Kerr (2017), Bernard Miège (1989) and David Hesmondhalgh (2013) as scholars who tend to blur the line between political economy and cultural studies approaches in their research. To begin with, I critically examine the structure of the games crowdfunding model as an alternative form of game industry. The focus is on exploring the relationships and imbalances between companies, i.e. the political economy of game crowdfunding networks and the position of both game developers and new professions within the emerging production configurations. Following the sifting focus of political economy research on network economies and "platform capitalism" (Srnicek 2017), the framing of the dissertation positions games crowdfunding within the context of the platformisation of cultural production (Gillespie 2010; Nieborg & Poell 2018). The main crowdfunding platform examined by this study, Kickstarter, is a transnational organisation that acts as a mediator within cultural production between several production network entities. At the same time, there are newly emerging mediator companies within the more granular structure of games crowdfunding that need to be interrogated. This focus on the different roles within the production networks also leads me to pay critical attention to aspects of game work within the games crowdfunding model, and to how that work is organised. Finally, one of the central issues underlining games crowdfunding and bypassing the traditional financiers of game production is the control over intellectual property (IP) – an issue that lies at the heart of political economy research (Mosco 2008), setting games crowdfunding in an overarching political economy research context.

Another key area of the dissertation are the backer audiences, and more specifically the contested area where they are located in a games crowdfunding context. The overarching theory behind this part of the study draws inspiration from cultural studies as a discipline that is more concerned about the position and role of users (it should be noted, though, that there are also cultural studies approaches that try to integrate aspects of production into their frameworks; Hesmondhalgh 2015). First, the cultural studies perspective employed in this dissertation connects to a call

for an overall interdisciplinary nature of research when studying cultural phenomena (Grossberg 1995; 2010). Second, I follow Nelson, Treichler and Grossberg in connecting cultural studies in interpretive and evaluative methodologies, with a focus on cultural practices, and an aim to understand processes of industrialisation and industry from the perspective of the audience: how do audiences feel about these processes, make sense of them and shape them with their cultural practices (Nelson et al. 1992, 2-5). Third, I concur that research should draw from whatever fields are needed to best understand the target of study, both in terms of theory and methods (ibid., 2). Following these lines of thought, my exploration of the backer communities combines elements and focus areas from the wider field of cultural studies, particularly audience research and fan studies as approaches that treat backer communities as active audiences that form their own cultural practices next to the 'intended' use handed to them by the cultural industries (i.e. I start from an assumption that backers participate in games crowdfunding for other reasons too besides just funding). Similarly, my methods – such as a survey study – have been chosen to suit the target of research, i.e. understanding the activities of the backer audiences.

The classic critical theory tradition of the political economy of media has been criticised for downplaying the importance of the user. Classic studies in the political economy tradition have, for example, theorized the "audience commodity" (Smythe 1981), rendering the audience as something that can be bought and moved around. One of the more prominent cultural industries theorists Bernard Miège (1989) criticised the Frankfurt School (especially Adorno and Horkheimer) for its economic determinism. Miège argued that commercialisation was not entirely a negative process, specifically because the emerging technologies also left openings for emerging innovations. In crowdfunding, the audience seemingly has a lot of openings for cultural participation, from voting rights in what to fund, to more versatile and co-creative roles. Therefore, its only logical that this dissertation tries to consider both perspectives. While exploring participatory viewpoints from the backer communities' perspectives, I also examine the crowdfunding audience as a group of people who pay cultural producers to become their workforce. Fusing these somewhat contrary viewpoints draws from theorists like Douglas Kellner (2009) and Eileen Meehan (2000) who have argued for balancing studies of political economy of media with a cultural studies perspective. Here, this is understood both as a call to bring in a counter-point to the political economy line of enquiry through integrating them with a study on the crowdfunding audience. This approach is then taken further in creating an interdisciplinary theoretical apparatus consisting of

cultural studies, political economy and game studies (see Figure 3 for the sub-disciplinary areas of the thesis).

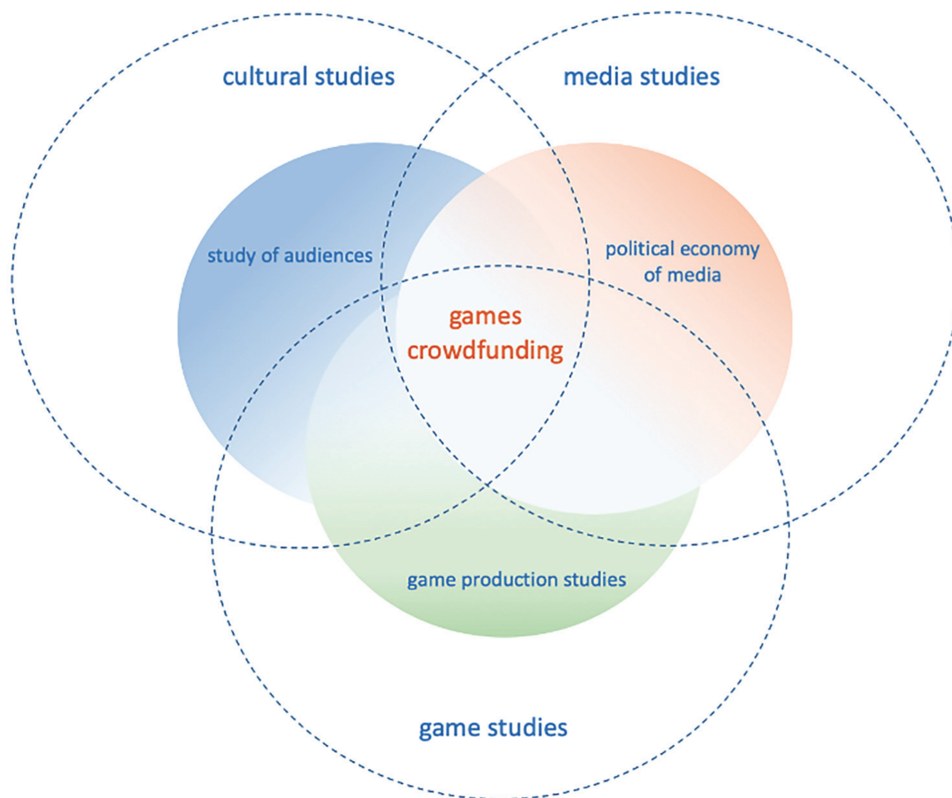

Figure 3. Thesis sub-disciplinary areas

The tension between commercialisation on one hand and emerging user opportunities on the other hand is at the heart of games crowdfunding, and provides a key site of inquiry for this dissertation. Crowdfunding is one of the key current phenomena tying together the domains of production and users – often in enlightening ways. As I hope to show in this dissertation, the role of the player-backer within the production network of games crowdfunding is not tackled only by deferring to past conceptualisations of blurring the boundaries between production and consumption. Issues of power, emancipation and labour are becoming increasingly complex in the current media landscape. As John Banks and Sal Humphreys (2008, 402-3, 414) argue, emerging modes of value-adding labour by user co-creators form new kinds of "hybrid relations that cut across the commercial

and non-commercial social networks and markets", and that while "messy", these "new formations hold a wide range of benefits and value." As I hope to show in this dissertation, the multifaceted contributions of crowdfunding backers are clearly worth a lot for the companies involved, but at the same time offer many other things too. One of the key examples depicting these 'hybrid relations' can be witnessed in examining the relationship of crowdfunding and retail. A more theoretical look at game retail in a crowdfunding context serves as an illustration of an emerging form of consumption. Through this approach, by concentrating on the tensions that exist between traditional 'fannish' activities (Scott 2015) such as discussing the crowdfunded game on fan forums, and activities specific to crowdfunding such as fans trying to market or sell the crowdfunded game to yet more fans, I aim to offer an example of the interplay between two main areas of the dissertation, the production networks and the audiences.

One area that this dissertation does not examine are the texts, i.e. the crowdfunded games themselves or how they are received and interpreted, for example. This is not to say that crowdfunded games do not belong in a discussion about games crowdfunding; but rather that my focus area was narrowed down to production, its reception and retail in a somewhat serendipitous way through answering specific paper calls and choosing particular journals as publication venues. Omitting the consideration of actual games also pushed my focus more towards the pre-launch production phase, that is arguably a much more visible and followed phase of the process. Consequently, while the actual crowdfunded products are of course important in their own right and are mentioned in passing throughout the dissertation, any kind of deeper analysis of crowdfunded, finished games is left for future studies.

1.3 The researcher position

In explicating my position within the research area, there are two main points to make from researcher and disciplinary perspectives.

I have a personal relationship with digital games, having grown up playing them from a very early age. I have been a fan of particular games and game developers throughout my adult life, and a customer with a vested interest in specific types of games retail. During the course of my PhD research I have directly contributed to dozens of crowdfunding campaigns including, among others, those I use as case examples in my articles (e.g. *Bloodstained: The Ritual of the Night* [2019] and *Conan*

[2016]). I also consider myself to be a fan of many of these games and for example Conan the Barbarian books and comics. Most of the user forums have their beginnings in the associated campaigns (i.e. one or several users create a forum and advertise it on the Kickstarter campaign comments section, encouraging others to join in the conversation in a better indexed environment). Consequently, I have been able to witness the birth and development of these forum cultures (especially the official *Bloodstained* fan forums – incidentally created by a user, and not the creators). I have participated in online discussions around some of the analysed games on Kickstarter comments sections and on user forums. I have also voted in polls, created by both users and creators, that have had actual effect on the final shape of some of the discussed games. As such, my analysis on games crowdfunding is clearly personal and rooted in the scholar-fan, or 'aca-fan' tradition (Jenkins 1992, 1–8; Scott 2015).

Rhoda MacRae (2007) outlines three different researcher-subculture positions. The 'Outsider-out' position is based on reading subcultural texts with little first-hand contact with the subject group. 'Outsider-in' is the classic ethnographic position where the researcher learns about the subculture by taking part in the dealings of the subculture and observing it. Lastly, through adopting an 'insider-in' position, the researcher becomes a part or member of the researched group. Across my articles, I move between all three researcher positions, combining them in a manner that serves a broader methodology focused on triangulation.

It is important to note that staying strictly within only one of the three researcher positions can be difficult to control. For example, on the *Bloodstained* forums, the degree of my involvement has been quite minor compared to many of the regular voices on the forums, the so-called 'power users' (regular commenters who often offer valuable analysis on trailers, gameplay demos etc. based on their extensive experience of the Castlevania game series). These power users could be seen to form an inner circle of *Bloodstained* fandom to which I have not belonged at any phase. Therefore, even though I consider myself as an insider within the *Bloodstained* fandom, I could study this group of 'power users' as an outsider if I was so inclined.

As a researcher, my disciplinary background is mostly within media studies, having studied media under the moniker of 'media science' at the University of Lapland between 2006-2009. A keen-eyed reader can perhaps witness this in this dissertation through spotting a prevailing media studies disciplinary approach, mostly within the critical studies-oriented base of the work. Still, I maintain that the work itself is interdisciplinary in nature. The interdisciplinary core of my approach was developed throughout my studies in a games studies master's degree programme

at the University of Tampere during 2009-2012. In my master's thesis that was focused on downloadable content in console gaming, I integrated a cultural studies approach to my work to balance out the partial cynicism of the political economy of media approach (the latter accounting for production structures, and the former explicating how fans navigated the structures imposed by corporate strategies). It is also worth mentioning that my disciplinary background in media studies was never that strong to begin with, and therefore such an interdisciplinary master's degree programme felt very natural, but also partly obfuscated the traditions of the single disciplines. In this way, my approach was perhaps 'born' as interdisciplinary.

The specific game studies approach that I take towards my work has been focused on game production, seeing the production of games as a part of games studies and also broader game research. The idea of treating game production as a part of game studies (given that production can be studied without studying games) could, of course, be contested. However, one area of game research that has demonstrated the existence of this connection in a poignant way is that of 'platform studies'. There, the very specific technical form of digital games is taken as a starting point which then opens up to rich, demonstrated connections to the surrounding games production culture, and the marketing and selling of games (e.g. Arsenault 2017; Altice 2015). One aim of this work has been to integrate production aspects into the 'core game studies' and defend their place there. Furthermore, in my research, the disciplinary approaches of game studies, media studies and cultural studies have been augmented and complimented by other, select approaches. In this dissertation it has meant importing some business studies concepts to the game production studies approach, mostly following ques laid out by Nieborg and Poell (2018) in their study of the platformisation of cultural production. One of the articles forming the core of this dissertation can be labelled, roughly speaking, as a business studies article. However, that particular disciplinary approach (with its sub-disciplines such as managerial studies and consumer studies) is otherwise absent from my work, and therefore I cannot embrace it as being "my own". Rather, in the pattern of mixed-methods research, concepts and theories are 'poached' from the business studies domain where needed.

1.4 Thesis structure

This study consists of four articles and a lengthy introduction section that both introduces the articles and fleshes out the discussions inaugurated in the articles. This

first main chapter has looked at the starting points, the framing and aims of the study, and the theoretical context I locate myself in. Chapter 2 looks at the study design of the dissertation and the framings of the involved sub-studies. I first discuss some of the methodological issues of the dissertation, including the interdisciplinary nature of the study that flows from a game studies starting point. I then elaborate and reflect on the different study perspectives and the differing knowledge interests that come with them, also reflecting on the value of the adopted methods in terms of game production studies. After this, the methods and data-sets of the study are elaborated. Finally, summaries of the four research articles are presented in terms of introducing the studies and their individual methods (for study results, see Chapter 4).

Chapter 3 outlines the background research for the dissertation. The first sub-chapter takes a look at the main concepts that frame the study, including crowdsourcing and crowdfunding. I also lay out the specifics of games crowdfunding in terms of the basic structure of a campaign, while also presenting some general Kickstarter funding figures. The second sub-chapter lays out the structure of the 'traditional' game industry, as the area is used as one of the starting points and, moreover, as the main point of contrast for the crowdfunding model. I also go over independent game production in order to contextualise games crowdfunding as one of the emerging strategies for survival within the larger indie game production field. The final sub-chapter explores the existing background research framing the study. To construct an outline for studying games crowdfunding, I first explore the burgeoning area of game production studies, highlighting the concept of 'production logic' as one of the key theories for my analysis. Next, I pay special attention to the platformisation of cultural production, and the effects that this phenomenon has had on game production. I then move on to studies that have specifically considered games crowdfunding. First, I look at studies from cultural studies perspectives, moving on to cover other study perspectives, mainly that of business studies where – generally speaking – the majority of crowdfunding research is conducted.

Chapter 4 is the main result chapter of the dissertation. Originating from the four research articles that form the body of this study, the results of the dissertation are presented in three sub-chapters. The first sub-chapter is focused on games crowdfunding from a game production perspective. I elaborate as to what are the effects of using crowdfunding to produce a game, beyond the surface level, and how can the associated processes be conceptualised from an industry structure perspective. The second sub-chapter examines the position, motivations and attitudes of crowdfunding backers. Funders are treated not only as backers, but also

as players, consumers and users. Finally, the third sub-chapter takes a look at games crowdfunding in the context of circulating crowdfunded games. Special attention is placed on examining the crowdfunding model as a counter-point to traditional game retail, and game retail is framed as an example of the interplay between production and consumption in the crowdfunding context.

Fifth and final main chapter consists of the main discussion and conclusions sections. In the discussion, I further contextualise key themes that have emerged throughout the results sub-chapters, such as the precarity of work within the games crowdfunding model and how platformisation of cultural production helps contextualise my results. I also cover some of the lingering questions the analysis touches upon but does not comprehensively deal with, such as the phenomenon of crowdfunding backers spectating game development through crowdfunding. The conclusions section summarises the central findings and elaborates the theoretical contributions of the study. Finally, the section concludes with a discussion on future research directions, both for the study of games crowdfunding and game production studies.

2 STUDY DESIGN

In this chapter, three areas are considered: the interdisciplinary nature of the dissertation; knowledge interests of the study; and the methods and data-sets used in the study. Finally, the chapter concludes with a general description of the four research articles that form the main body of the dissertation.

2.1 Methodology: Interdisciplinary research

The phenomenon of crowdfunding is complex and rapidly evolving. It moves between technology, business, unique media forms (such as games), and large online communities. Very quickly, issues of production, platforms, platformisation, the backer audience, opportunities for co-creation and financing start to seem important. Among all the possible areas of interest, this dissertation focuses on: 1) games crowdfunding as an alternative model for game production, and as a wider system for cultural production facilitated by a specific kind of platform environment (instead of treating crowdfunding as just a financing instrument); 2) the participation motivations and attitudes towards the crowdfunding model by the backer audience; and 3) the relationship of games crowdfunding with game retail, and how this relationship reflects a wider cultural transition of contemporary media retail. Arguably, a study of games crowdfunding requires many research perspectives to be adequately captured, as not one single discipline could capture the phenomenon in any sufficiently robust way. To explore these targets, this dissertation uses a combination of approaches originating from different disciplines: game studies, media studies (political economy of media) and cultural studies, along with some complementary concepts and viewpoints drawn from business studies.

Consequently, the methodological 'package' of the dissertation has ended up being varied, resulting in a mixed methods approach. My exploration of games crowdfunding started with looking at it through a case study; I wanted to explore the model as an alternative production channel for games that might be able to sidestep existing hegemonic mainstream production structures. It soon became evident that the dynamic relationship between the project creators and the backer community

was such a central element of the phenomenon that a larger online survey to explore the backer attitudes was needed. Furthermore, in considering some of the notable effects crowdfunding has had on the production and circulation of games and the ways these reflect other ongoing transformations in media production, I ended up writing about the relationship between crowdfunding and game retail.

Adopting multiple perspectives and methods is a good fit with a research focus that originates from game studies, due to the nature of contemporary game studies both as a discipline focused on the unique form of games, and also as an interdisciplinary field of research (Mäyrä & Sotamaa 2017). Game studies started out (in the late 1990s and early 2000s) as having the need to borrow methods and approaches from other disciplines because it had no existing tradition of its own (Mäyrä 2009). Later, when the discipline was more established, game studies could rely on its own nascent and expanding traditions, while at the same time pursuing a project of building and expanding game studies in order for it to be able to examine any relevant area of games and the surrounding culture (ibid.). More recently, there has been a similar need to establish a sub-field of game studies concentrated on the issues of game production. Researchers in this growing body of research (see chapter 3.3) see that game production has enough unique characteristics to necessitate a production studies perspective of its own (i.e. one that is not borrowed wholesale from e.g. film production studies). Therefore, through such strategies of gradual assimilation, interdisciplinary research can be seen as a method of building a discipline of one's own.

In cultural studies it is established practice to draw from whichever fields are needed to best understand the target of study, both in terms of theory and methods (Nelson et al. 1992, 2). Like cultural studies, game studies draws from multiple outside disciplines for its own benefit. Rather than being a hindrance, the interdisciplinary nature of game studies in fact makes it only stronger (Sotamaa 2009, 24; Mäyrä 2009). An interdisciplinary examination should flexibly conform to its area of research on a case-by-case basis. Game cultural phenomena are always complex, and tending to avoid one-sided examinations, they require movement between different viewpoints (Sotamaa 2009, 27). Through this movement, an interdisciplinary research approach allows researchers to cover more "ground" and account for some of the blind-spots that might exist in single disciplines. This is especially true when the target of study has received little research attention (as is the case with games crowdfunding), and when there is an aim to provide a sufficiently holistic understanding of the phenomenon.

Furthermore, an interdisciplinary approach allows the challenge of different perspectives from the vantage point of others. This might for example mean demanding a consideration of the wider context of each phenomenon (Mäyrä 2008, 6). As an example, games crowdfunding deals with game production, including typical issues that involve financing and development, but this is affected and augmented by the unique position of the backer audience within the production process. The areas of production and consumption bleed into each other in very fluid ways, through which fan culture and 'below-the-line work' (Mayer 2011) assume new, sometimes imperceptible combinations (for example as fan labour but also through other ways). While the areas of fan cultures and emerging forms of labour were traditionally studied separately in cultural studies and media studies, more recent scholarship has made a valid point of studying production and consumption together (e.g. Sotamaa 2009; Meehan 2000; Kellner 2009).

People and technologies both have their place in negotiated production processes. Those places become understandable only when the wider social, cultural, economic and political contexts are acknowledged (Kerr 2006, 6). Studies on production need to constantly rethink and reassert the boundaries of the cultures it seeks to describe (Mayer 2016, 708). Hesmondhalgh (2013, 5) reminds that cultural industries are "complex, ambivalent, and contested", and therefore we should not seek any simple answers when evaluating the power relations within them. Rather, technologies, platforms and production models should be contextualised and judged case by case. A central question for a dissertation like this, is to critically evaluate different areas of the phenomenon, each time asking ourselves what are we in fact looking at (e.g. production, consumption, or a new kind of hybrid form of the two). Ultimately, this need for continual questioning arises because it is hard to tell from the outset which things actually belong to the games crowdfunding phenomenon. Studies like this serve to define the boundaries of the phenomenon, which then helps us get closer to understanding, from a critical point of view, where the power resides within these structures, who has any significant agency, and who is (perhaps) exploited and by whom.

Of course, not all research areas can be studied with set methods, and different focus areas will require differing methods. Sometimes, such an approach works through triangulation where the different approaches serve to verify each other, to deepen the analysis, and to get closer to the 'truth'. In an attempt to sidestep this kind of objectivist study agenda, I adopt a constructivist cultural studies approach to triangulation, where triangulation serves to problematize any version of 'truth' that seems too simple or neat (Saukko 2003, 23-24). Instead of corroborating a shared

result, different methods might in fact contradict each other. This is precisely what interdisciplinary research should aspire to do, as "one of the objectives of multiperspectival theory is to establish creative tension between different perspectives" (Sotamaa 2009, 27). The purpose of this approach is not to try to set the target of study into an existing template, but to examine its uniqueness. Mayer reminds us that "the object of study is made through the research process, the methods deployed, and the boundaries of the field" (2016, 708). Using triangulation to challenge single disciplinary results aims to "capture and appreciate the multidimensionality of particular problematics" for the benefit of the study (Sotamaa 2009, 27), and this is certainly true with this dissertation, with several study perspectives that differ in emphasis and knowledge interests.

2.2 Study perspectives and knowledge interests

With interdisciplinary research it is important to consider how the unique perspectives of the different disciplines fit together. Due to the interdisciplinary nature of the game studies field, there are several, often conflicting ways to write about games, including differing knowledge interests that guide research. No research tradition is completely free of a political agenda of some sort, and within an interdisciplinary study these agendas might be at odds with each other. The interdisciplinary nature of games studies itself is sometimes questioned, and what we call interdisciplinary research might sometimes be better described as a rather loose multidisciplinary research (Deterding 2017). In this dissertation, game studies serve as an umbrella under which other perspectives are assembled, namely political economy, cultural studies and, to a degree, business studies. However, the game studies perspective also serves to denote the specificity of games and games culture as a target of the research. Contemporary digital games are a naturally complex research target in which equally relevant elements of cultural production, online and offline audiences, technology and high-intensity platform-capitalism collide. It is a different thing to crowdfund a game than it is to crowdfund a movie. The history of game production is unique, too, and while the largest AAA game productions might resemble and borrow from Hollywood film productions, the two are certainly built on different bases. As such, any disruptive technology deployed in game production such as bypassing mainstream industry gatekeepers via crowdfunding will have unique consequences.

To account for the production structures of the crowdfunding model, this dissertation applies a political economy perspective. Political economy research is concerned with critically examining cultural industries. Drawing from Habermas (1968/2015), the knowledge interest of studies focused on cultural industry political economy is emancipatory, aiming to make invisible structures of power visible and in this way emancipate the individual from the dominant ideology (for example, that of cultural production). More recently, the platformisation of cultural production has drawn the interest of political economy scholars. Research has been carried out, for example, to examine the infrastructural control over relations between the different participants in platformised cultural production (Nieborg & Poell 2018). It is also important to pay attention to how models of cultural production – such as those employed by new platforms – transition from earlier modes of production, together with why they transition and with what kind of 'baggage'. Questions may also be asked as to how these emerging production models re-shape and transform old structures, to what end, and to whose benefit? It is also important to identify and locate any dominant ideology co-optation targeted at supposedly democratising modes of cultural production. My first research question, "How is the traditional games production network changed when using the crowdfunding model?" is answered through examining both the familiar production roles and the emerging production intermediaries that feature within the games crowdfunding model. This allows both to contrast games crowdfunding with the traditional AAA game industry, and to evaluate the emancipatory/democratising potential of the games crowdfunding production logic.

On the other hand, the dissertation assumes stances drawn from cultural studies in its interest to account for the position and role of the backer audience (Jenkins 2006; Kellner 2009). A simplistic, deterministic view on crowdfunding would dictate that crowdfunding is used only for what it was supposedly created for: gathering financing. Adopting a constructivist approach, I see backers as subjects who construct their own meanings in relation to their participation. Here, I ask: "What kind of motivations and attitudes do backers have for participating in games crowdfunding?"; How and for what do users actually use crowdfunding?; and What does crowdfunding offer them? This exploration is achieved through the online survey study where I first looked at user motivations to participate in games crowdfunding in a quantitative capacity, and then complemented this with a qualitative study of the open answer sections of the survey to bring a cultural studies-oriented depth to the analysis. This examination of the role of the crowdfunding backers has two important functions. First, it directly informs inquiries targeted at

the crowdfunding production structure. Crowdfunding can be seen to be an idealised production structure, where a large group of users plays a key part in democratisation and emancipation. As such, the role and position of the backers is one of the crucial elements in understanding the organisation and inner working of any production that happens through crowdfunding. Second, interrogating the backer audience helps locate the aforementioned dissenting voices and different perspectives that potentially challenge the existing hegemonic perspectives. The knowledge interest of cultural studies is often focused on seeing the opportunities – and not the restrictions – of the media cultural landscape. However, political economy perspectives in this area can sometimes be quite cynical, old-fashioned and stubborn in terms of acknowledging the activities and opinions of the fans, and fail to recognise new forms of value that can be derived from emerging forms of consumption. As cultural studies and political economy of media approaches have historically often slided into opposing stances with each other (Hesmondhalgh 2015), combining the two perspectives can balance each from straying towards uncritical optimism or blind cynicism (Meehan 2000). Cultural studies methods like fan ethnography aim to uncover how fans appropriate and rework mediated ideology, whereas political economy helps to analyse the activities and structures that construct that mediated ideology and provide ways to locate fan cultures in a wider social and economic context.

Finally, though not central to the study, this dissertation delves into business studies both as a result of the financial nature of crowdfunding and to better identify targets of inquiry in terms of the industry mechanisms and the political economy associated with them. As a by-product of conducting an online survey and also as a result of choosing a skilled co-author with a background of his own, I ended up writing a business studies-oriented article focused on backer motives and attitudes. While business studies have produced probably the largest body of work targeted on crowdfunding, the perspectives and knowledge interests of business studies – be it studies on entrepreneurship, management, or consumption – are often very practically motivated to test and maximise business processes. In the eyes of a game scholar with a media/cultural studies orientation, they also tend to lack any kind of critical tone in wider sense, such as that present for example in political economy. Thus, an article that tries to draw critical attention to the work conditions of cultural workers in the crowdfunding model and an article that tries to present aspects of crowdfunding as an effective channel for entrepreneurs to market their product, might easily be in conflict with each other in terms of the message they put forth. In writing the business studies article, with the quantitative survey results I tried to

emphasise cultural studies-oriented aspects in both the motivation of the study and hypotheses, and also in interpreting the results, but found it to be quite difficult in terms of how rigidly business studies articles are structured around the quantitative results, thus leaving the important "What then?" question out of the discussion. In a study centred on user motivations, for example, business studies might be first and foremost interested in how the results inform entrepreneurial strategies, and any substantial "managerial implications". However, while lacking deeper reflection, business studies might offer benefit to a more culturally oriented study in an explorative manner, informing the researcher as to what to look at or critique, and what the direction of the capitalist production logic is (e.g. in terms of platform capitalism) (cf. Nieborg & Poell 2018).

Combining these different perspectives and knowledge interests has had both upsides and downsides in the course of developing this dissertation project. The different perspectives that emerge serve to both complement and challenge each other, so bringing depth to the multidimensional target of the study. However, choosing a single perspective would no doubt have achieved a deeper analysis on a narrower area. Handling multiple perspectives has also meant more work in trying to grasp the different areas in a sufficient way, sometimes posing quite a daunting task. In the end, however, the mixed methods approach adopted is supported by the nature and role of this study, and as far as this writer is aware, it is the first PhD dissertation centred on the cultural aspects of games crowdfunding. As such, a more widely reaching explorative approach was called for, that serves as a basis for future studies aiming to build on more specific sub-sectors of the area.

2.3 Methods and data sets

To meet the needs of a multifaceted approach to the crowdfunding phenomenon, the research material was compiled from a variety of sources. Following from the different angles of the crowdfunding production environment, backer motives and attitudes, and the retail context – each domain was mainly associated with different data sets and different methods: an explorative case study for production, an online survey for the audience, and a less empirical explorative study for the retail context aimed at conceptualising emerging practices. It is worth mentioning that dedicating methods and datasets entirely to their separate domains would make the study multidisciplinary, instead of interdisciplinary, in terms of methodology (Deterding 2017). However, all the datasets have informed those studies that have come later,

at least partially, in a way that warrants calling the dissertation an interdisciplinary study.

Preparation for the case studies (Article I) meant collecting a "full variety of evidence" that could then be combined with other data sets in flexible ways (Yin 2009). With the example cases, this included: campaign and marketing material, update and announcement texts, interviews given to the media, material on various social media including text and videos, and two-way communications on both the official campaign comments section and on popular hobbyist forums. The data used in the case studies was collected by the author during and after the examined campaigns – *Bloodstained: Ritual of the Night* and *Conan* – in the spring and summer of 2015. I was a backer on both campaigns, close-reading the campaign sites, updates and other messaging on social media. I read most of the messaging on the official campaign comments section, paying particular attention to any criticism levelled by the users and the ways that developers addressed these criticisms and other concerns. With *Conan*, I also followed the forums on the board gaming site Boardgamegeek.com, which is a significant board gaming hobbyist site. Limiting the applicability of the results arising from the two case studies, both campaigns were very large, high-profile successes in an environment where the vast majority of campaigns are much smaller. As large production efforts they offered a lot of material for example in terms of industry structure and emerging industry intermediaries, but at the same time it is difficult to extrapolate some of the results to small campaigns. Additionally, as *Conan* is a board game, not all of the remarks about its campaign translate into a study centred on crowdfunding of digital games. Therefore, I mainly use it as an example in instances where the results would also apply to digital games.

The collected case study data supported the later studies centred on backer motivations and the retail context (Articles II-IV) in multiple ways, for example in motivating later research questions, hypotheses and analysis. Further 'evidence' has also been collected and used as secondary data to back up the claims made in the analyses and reporting. Namely, I have collected and regularly updated a list of completed and released crowdfunded digital games available on the Steam platform, that currently holds 411 titles. Each entry contains the title name, style and genre, release date, information on a possible physical release, Metacritic and Steam scores, funding goal, date and result, backer count, cheapest tier price to get the game, possible beta release, crowdfunding platform, project creator, and the announced developer and publisher. The list has made it possible to make approximations for example on how often campaigns offer physical games, the average price to get a

crowdfunded game, and typical ‘revival’ game genres. Finally, I conducted a series of research interviews with professionals involved in crowdfunding campaigns. These included game developers, crowdfunding intermediaries, and Kickstarter staff. While none of the articles was heavily based on these interviews, some of them are referenced in the articles, containing anecdotes that were important to the argumentation.

Articles II and III were mostly based on the survey data. The online survey, centred on measuring backer attitudes and motivations for participating in games crowdfunding, received 426 usable responses. The survey was open during Sep 30th–Nov 15th, 2016. Through multiple pages of Likert-scale question items, the survey aimed to uncover what kinds of consumer value backers attach to their crowdfunding participation and which motivations correlated with further backing behaviour. A qualitative section at the end of the survey asked the respondent to freely “[d]escribe other reasons why you participate in crowdfunding”. For many of the respondents, it presented a chance to elaborate and reflect on their survey answers or for example any disagreements they had. Additionally, a smaller follow-up survey centred on issues concerning backers’ backing and playing habits was sent to a randomized subset of respondents, resulting in 39 usable answers. It should be noted that in terms of gender balance the quantitative data was quite skewed toward males (83.6% against 15.5% females). This could be considered a limitation of the data, as I have not been able to find statistics in terms of how representative this ratio is in comparison with the larger crowdfunding scene. My intuition is that these numbers do represent the Kickstarter games crowdfunding environment, in that the model is vastly populated by white males with a higher education and extra income to spend on entertainment products, and who gravitate towards early adoption of new technology. (For more details on conducting the survey and the analysis of responses, see the methodology sections in Articles II and III.)

In addition to the case study evidence, Article IV directly utilised the survey results, for example to argue aspects of backer attitudes towards buying and pre-ordering crowdfunded games. The methodological nature of Article IV is somewhat more complex due to its origins. The article was an invited chapter for *Point of Sale: Analyzing Media Retail* (Herbert & Johnson 2019), an anthology book exploring retail as a key phenomenon at the centre of popular media culture. The aim of the book was to avoid adopting a too restricted political economy perspective that centres on power players such as the largest film studios, and instead considered the meaning and power of everyday retail experiences. The editors of the book also wanted to avoid adopting a single-minded production studies perspective that would overlook

the perspective of retail workers and media shoppers. Through an explorative manner, Article IV tries to situate games crowdfunding both at the historical development of game retail, and to serve as a conceptualising work that identifies practices related to crowdfunding within this contemporary-historical context.

2.4 Research articles

In the following section, short summaries of the included research articles are presented. These summaries introduce the research questions and methods of the articles. The results of the articles are not touched on here (see Chapter 4 for full details), but instead the starting points for each sub-study are presented.

Article I: Double Duty: Crowdfunding and the Evolving Game Production Network (Tyni, 2020, Games and Culture, 15(2), 114-137; Online First: Dec 2017)

This article examines the changes in the traditional game production network when crowdfunding is used as a tool for marketing, and a means for funding the game production process. For independent game creators aiming, first, to bypass publisher influence in terms of what kind of content is produced, and second, to retain the intellectual property rights to their games, crowdfunding offers a channel to directly ask for funding from the gaming-audience – a seemingly democratic and emancipatory alternative to publisher funding. Adopting a focus that combines a cultural studies perspective with the political economy of games, the article illustrates the crowdfunded game production network and the differences between this emerging model and the traditional game production network. Drawing from Kerr (2017), the concept of production logic is used as a frame of reference and as a theoretical lens to understand and position the crowdfunding model as a part of the wider game industry and cultural industries landscape.

Adopting case study as its method, the article examines two example games – *Bloodstained: Ritual of the Night* (2019) which is a digital game, and *Conan* (2016) which is a board game – both of which were successfully crowdfunded on Kickstarter. Following a case study methodology by Yin (2009), a wide variety of available evidence including a spectrum of official press material, official posts and commenting on the Kickstarter project page and fan forums, messaging and commenting on social media channels, interviews in podcast episodes and YouTube

videos, is used to reconstruct the entirety of the used production networks, paying special attention to emerging cultural intermediaries. The article asks what kind of consequences this kind of production network has on the developers and the backers of a crowdfunding campaign in terms of labour and consumption. Finally, the article discusses how this emerging mode of production reflects the wider landscape of media production and consumption in terms of longer identifiable trajectories.

Article II: Why Do We Crowdfund? An Empirical Study of Consumer Value in Games Crowdfunding (Tyni & Hamari; submitted)

The article investigates the relationship between consumer value and attitudes towards crowdfunding participation in backing crowdfunding projects. Specifically, it examines how various consumer values relate to 1) backers' attitudes towards crowdfunding, and 2) their continued backing intentions. In reward-based crowdfunding, being able to acquire the funded product is easily considered as the main reason to participate (see e.g. Gerber & Hui 2013). Crowdfunding presents an interesting case, as it is not the most obvious choice of getting a reward/product in terms of saving money and time. It is also a more communal market form, which can further spur a variety of consumer motivations to participate. Thus, considering consumer value as simply being based on an economic perspective is too simplistic, as there may be many more nuanced sources from which consumer value can be derived, for example the hedonic and aesthetic aspects of a product or a service.

Concentrating on reward-based games crowdfunding, the study employs survey data (n=426) gathered among people who have participated in campaigns as backers. The chosen constructs for measuring perceived consumer value rely on the PERVAL framework of Sweeney and Soutar (2001), which includes dimensions related to economic (such as usefulness and cost), quality, enjoyment and social aspects (e.g. building or joining a community, altruism). Further dimensions adapted or developed for the purposes of this study were 'co-creation opportunities', 'novelty', 'rarity', 'anti-corporate attitudes' and 'cynical attitudes' (e.g. reflecting that it is hard to trust the model since large corporations have appropriated it for marketing purposes). The survey consisted of constructs adapted from previously published sources. The independent variables contained constructs related to the PERVAL-instrument and the additional dimensions described above. The dependent variables measured intentions to continue backing. The survey items were based on a seven-point Likert scale. The article concludes by discussing both the

theoretical implications of the results as well as implications for entrepreneurs wishing to engage in games crowdfunding.

The work between the authors was divided so that I mostly designed the crowdfunding-specific consumer value dimensions based on earlier survey research on motivations by my co-author Juho Hamari and implemented and conducted the survey. I then mostly designed the crowdfunding-specific survey constructs, conducted the crowdfunding-related literature review, wrote most of the introduction, literature review and discussion. Juho Hamari was responsible for the background theory (consumer value theory and the original PERVAL framework), methodological design of the study, conducting the quantitative analysis, writing all the results sections in terms of the quantitative parts of the study and comparing and contrasting the study to background literature in terms of study design. The rest, including interpreting and contextualising the results, was done by both of us.

Article III: Spectating Development and Other Backer Motivations for Participating in Games Crowdfunding (Tyni, 2018, Proceedings of DiGRA Nordic 2018, Nov 28-30, 2018, University of Bergen, Norway)

The article describes an exploratory study examining backer motivations for participating in reward-based games crowdfunding. The study was conducted as a follow-up study for a quantitative survey study (n=426) in order to give depth to the survey answers and deepen the understanding on what kind of emergent values backers might attach to their crowdfunding behaviour, e.g. in terms of new forms of consumption. During the last decade, crowdfunding has become a significant new means to fund creative productions. Reward-based crowdfunding has been compared to a pre-order scheme and TV shopping channels (Bogost 2012). It is reasonable to assume that for those who back reward-based campaigns, getting the product is one of the central reasons for participating in crowdfunding. However, a closer look at crowdfunding reveals that backers attach many kinds of meanings and motivations to their involvement with the model.

The study utilises three sets of data: two were drawn from an online survey which included a quantitative section (n=426), and an open answer section at the end of the survey asking the respondent to freely "[d]escribe other reasons why you participate in crowdfunding". For many of the respondents, it presented a chance to elaborate and reflect on their survey answers or for example on any disagreements they had. The open-answer section received 114 usable answers, with many of the

answers surprisingly long (from single sentences to passages of several lines). Additionally, a smaller follow-up survey was sent to a randomized subset of the respondents (N=50). This survey had four open questions centred on issues concerning backers' backing and playing habits, including questions on how much time they used for these activities, and whether they saw crowdfunding to be a hobby of theirs. The follow-up survey resulted in 39 usable answers. All of the open answers were coded and organized into thematic groups. The uncovered motivational categories are not exclusive, but overlap in various ways. The qualitative results deepen the analysis inaugurated by the quantitative survey, for example by highlighting emerging forms of backers' consumption habits.

Article IV: Game Retail and Crowdfunding (Tyni & Sotamaa, 2019, in D. Herbert & D. Johnson [Eds.] Point of Sale: Analyzing Media Retail, pp. 75–90, Rutgers University Press)

The chapter examines games crowdfunding as a special case of game retail that illustrates some of the recent trends and transitions in the wider game retail scene, and on a more general level, the wider media consumption landscape. The chapter goes over general numbers about game retail, connecting games crowdfunding to a longer line of media consumption. The study also makes a point about comparing game crowdfunding and the normal pre-ordering of games. Focus is placed on the aspects of crowdfunding that have the closest connection to regular retail practices, i.e. how products are offered on crowdfunding campaign sites and how the model meets with customer expectations. The chapter understands games crowdfunding as a new area of fan activity, with an aim to conceptualise the emerging phenomena therein. It provides evidence of budding media consumption habits, including ways that the boundaries between production and consumption are becoming blurred through a multi-faceted "retailisation" process.

The chapter draws from several approaches and data sets. Starting from the beginning of 2015, the authors have followed several different game crowdfunding campaigns as long-term case studies. A "full variety" of case study evidence (Yin 2009) about the campaigns is close-read to form a nuanced understanding of the meanings backers attach to getting, buying or pre-ordering games through crowdfunding campaigns. A constantly updated list of crowdfunded games released on the Steam platform is used to approximate prices of crowdfunded titles, and how many (initially digitally released) game titles have achieved a physical release. Case study analysis is supplemented with an online survey of crowdfunding backers

conducted in the fall of 2016, where a number of survey items asked respondents to evaluate the relationship of funding crowdfunding campaigns and buying/pre-ordering games. Finally, evidence from a contextualising interview study is used to back up the argumentation. The thematic interviews cover crowdfunding project creators, intermediaries who offer them services, and Kickstarter staff. The work between the authors was divided so that Olli Sotamaa contributed most of the background literature in terms of the wider game industry and came up with the concept of 'retailisation', while I conducted the rest of the research and wrote most of the article. Most sections were discussed between us, including all conclusions.

Concluding this section, Figure 4 showcases where each article can be located in terms of contextualising their study perspectives within the larger thematic area of the political economy of game production, comprising of game production, game products and players.

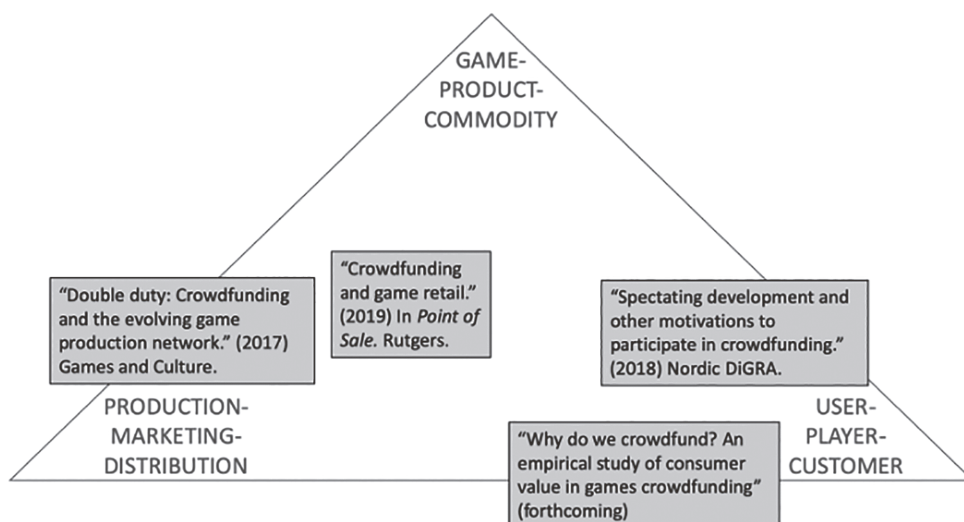

Figure 4. The positioning of the research articles

3 RESEARCH AREA AND RELATED WORK

In its current form based on online platforms, crowdfunding is a relatively new phenomenon. It grew on the Web 2.0 wave of the early 2000s and found its identity through the rise of crowdsourcing. Nowadays, there are several sub-areas of crowdfunding with different platforms, funding types and focus areas, some of which are especially popular with gaming projects. This dissertation focuses on reward-based crowdfunding of digital games on the US-based crowdfunding platform Kickstarter, as during my research period, most of the crowdfunded game projects could be found there.

In order to build a sufficient context for this examination, this chapter consists of three specified sub-chapters. In the first sub-chapter I will go over the key phenomena related to my research area: crowdsourcing as a starting point for modern crowdfunding; crowdfunding as a general phenomenon; features of reward-based crowdfunding; and a basic description on how crowdfunding is used for game projects. In order to contextualise many of the changes crowdfunding introduces into traditional game production, the second sub-chapter will go over how the traditional game industry works in terms of production structures. In this section, I also go over the relationship between games crowdfunding and the independent production of games, as this is the area of production most affected by crowdfunding.

In the third and final sub-chapter I review and discuss the key theories and research that frame my analysis presented in the later chapters. While there is a growing body of research focused on crowdfunding within the cultural industries, there exists only a handful of studies focused on games crowdfunding specifically. As a form of game production, other studies centred on game industry practices can of course be applied to look at games crowdfunding. Consequently, the first and lengthiest part of the discussion in this section concentrates on more general game production studies literature, paying special attention to the political economy of games. After this, I discuss political economy studies and cultural studies that have concentrated on crowdfunding in general and games crowdfunding in particular. Ending the chapter, I give a concise review on how business studies have covered

crowdfunding and games crowdfunding, focusing on the ways they contextualise parts of this study.

3.1 Key phenomena

Crowdfunding did not originate from thin air but rather out of the coalescing techno-economic-cultural trajectories that emerged around the turn of the millennium. The covered key phenomena for this study include: 1) crowdsourcing, as a background and seedbed for tasks spread out to online communities; 2) crowdfunding as a general phenomenon in terms of numbers and modes; 3) reward-based crowdfunding as a main type of funding for games; and 4) how games crowdfunding works on a basic level.

Crowdsourcing

The concept of crowdfunding refers to a phenomenon where an individual or organisation publicly presents a project or cause, for which they want to collect relatively small funding contributions from a relatively large group of individuals online, typically on a crowdfunding platform. The concept of crowdfunding has its roots in the concept of crowdsourcing (Howe 2008; Brabham 2013). The contributing editor of Wired magazine, Jeff Howe, coined the concept in a 2006 article and concurrently launched a blog called Crowdsourcing: Tracking the Rise of the Amateur (Brabham 2013). Howe described a new organisational model of work where companies chose tasks previously performed by employees and outsourced them to others with an open call to online communities (Brabham 2013). "A portmanteau of two concepts – outsourcing and a crowd of online labourers", crowdsourcing was adopted incredibly quickly into everyday use (Brabham 2013, xvii-xviii) due to the contemporary cultural zeitgeist of online mediated platforms for enabling a participatory culture (Jenkins 2006). While Howe used enterprises such as Threadless.com, Amazon Mechanical Turk, and Innocentive.com as examples, Brabham argues that the concept was soon used for almost any online phenomenon involving user crowds, including "Wikipedia, YouTube, Flickr, Second Life, open-source software, and blogs" that veered off from the original definition of the term (2013, xviii). For the purposes of his book *Crowdsourcing*, Brabham defines crowdsourcing as "an online, distributed problem-solving and production model

that leverages the collective intelligence of online communities to serve specific organizational goals" (2013, xix). The emergence of crowdsourcing was preceded by the emergence of related phenomena, such as peer production and community work. Consequently crowdsourcing, too, led to new phenomena and concepts like crowdfunding.

Crowdfunding

The concept of crowdfunding became popularised in public discussion with the popularisation of online mediated crowdfunding platform sites, Indiegogo in 2008 and Kickstarter in 2009. While the concept of 'crowdfunding' was first used in the 2000s, the phenomenon of asking for funding from the crowd is much older. Reaching back to the days of the art patrons of renaissance-era Italy, there is a long history of projects being funded by communities (Swords 2017), aiming to produce public services for the whole community such as a new town well or an ice-skating rink. During the 1990s, crowdfunding was used in the music industry; for example, the British rock band Marillion funded their tour by soliciting small funding contributions from their fan community (Lewis 2001). In discussing "fan-ancing" in connection with crowdfunding, Scott (2015) reminds that:

> "[f]annish economies, whether financial or cultural, are complex. Fans are, after all, avid consumers, in addition to being cultural critics and creators, and accordingly fans considered themselves core financial "backers" of media objects long before the emergence of crowdfunding platforms."

While sites like Indiegogo and Kickstarter represent the current platform-centric crowdfunding model, they were not the first online-mediated crowdfunding efforts. Prior to them, for example, there had been fundraising campaigns for recording artists and a game-related project called P500.[1] P500, by GMT Games, is a pre-order system where a creator would showcase a ready-for-production concept for a board game and if 500 pre-orders were reached, the game would be produced.

There are a few other concepts that are also related to crowdfunding, for example peer-to-peer lending, micro-lending and crowd-patronage (Swords 2017). However, there are conflicting views within academic research as to whether crowdfunding is a part of crowdsourcing, i.e. does crowdfunding belong under this larger umbrella concept as a sub-area. For Brabham (2013), the locus of power within crowdfunding

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[1] https://www.gmtgames.com/s-2-p500.aspx

is too de-centralised to count it as a form of crowdsourcing, and Mollick (2014) for example sees crowdfunding to be its own unique area, separate from crowdsourcing. Furthermore, while 'crowd-patronage' is a helpful conceptualisation in this context, it refers to a phenomenon with different characteristics (see e.g. Swords 2017).

Previous research has used various terms to describe the different key parts of crowdfunding. The people who fund projects have been called backers (Smith 2015), funders (Agrawal et al. 2015), sponsors (Ryu & Kim 2016), donors (Aitamurto 2011), investors (Cholakova & Clarysse 2015), contributors (Burtch et al. 2013), patrons (Swords 2017), crowdfundees (Bretschneider et al. 2014) and crowdfunders (Burtch et al. 2013), who then fund, contribute or pledge to campaigns. The people who create crowdfunding projects and seek funding have been called project creators (Bretschneider & Leimeister 2017), project founders (Davidson & Poor 2015), entrepreneurs (Belleflamme et al. 2014) and fundraisers (Bouncken et al. 2015). In this dissertation I use the term 'backer' to refer to people who fund campaigns and the term 'creator' or 'project creator' to refer to people who create and run the crowdfunding campaigns. The term 'campaign' refers to the active campaign phase, when the crowdfunding project is live and can be funded on a crowdfunding platform site. The term 'project' refers to the entire endeavour of creating the game through crowdfunding, including pre-campaign pre-production, the campaign phase, the post-campaign phase up until the launch of the game, and if necessary, post-launch work including patching and updating the game (many backers would feel that the project is successfully completed only after all of the 'loose threads' involved have been taken care of).

The variance in different terms concerning the backers, especially, is partly a consequence of different terms fitting the existing vocabularies of different scientific fields, but also reflects the existence of different sub-categories of crowdfunding. Current research typically divides crowdfunding into several different sub-categories based on the details of the funding arrangement (e.g. Mollick 2014; Ryu & Kim 2016). In reward-based crowdfunding, backers give money for a project that aims to produce a product or a service, and are offered the complete product as a reward as soon as it is finished. In lending-based crowdfunding, backers lend the money for the project, which then pays the loans back later, typically with interest. In donation-based crowdfunding, nothing is necessarily given back for contributing to the campaign. In equity-based crowdfunding, backers receive shares of the funded enterprise in return for their contribution (Mollick 2014; Ryu & Kim 2016). In patronage-based crowdfunding, backers contribute to a project on a monthly basis, e.g. to support the ongoing work of a recording artist (Swords 2017). These different

kinds of crowdfunding can then be supplemented with further arrangements in terms of funding the project. For example, in 'match crowdfunding' an outside investor – either private or public – promises to double the project funding if the projected funding goal is achieved. Many platforms also employ several sub-categories of funding; for example, Fig.co allows project creators to offer both reward- and equity-based crowdfunding within the same project.

Perhaps due to these sub-categories, it has been difficult for scholarship to give a definition for crowdfunding that encompasses the entirety of the phenomenon. Many of the current definitions originate from business studies. Schwienbacher and Larralde (2010) define crowdfunding as "an open call, essentially through the Internet, for the provision of financial resources either in form of donation or in exchange for some form of reward and/or voting rights in order to support initiatives for specific purposes". According to Mollick (2014), that definition leaves out related phenomena such as internet-based peer-to-peer lending and fundraising initiated by fans to support e.g. a recording artist. Specifically addressing the "entrepreneurial context", Mollick (2014) gives an often-cited definition for crowdfunding as "the efforts by entrepreneurial individuals and groups – cultural, social, and for-profit – to fund their ventures by drawing on relatively small contributions from a relatively large number of individuals using the internet, without standard financial intermediaries". Unlike Schwienbacher and Larralde (2010), Mollick does not account for any peripheral functions of the activity, in a business sense or any other. For example, games crowdfunding is as much about giving money (funds) for a project than it is about giving other things that directly support the campaign creator, such as free labour for promoting the game, co-creative work force for development, community management, play testing, and so on. Furthermore, the definition by Mollick fails to recognise the backer perspective, something that is included in the definition by Schwienbacher and Larralde (2010) as "… in form of donation or in exchange for some form of reward and/or voting rights". As I point out in this dissertation (in Chapter 4.2), backers receive other benefits and/or rewards besides the crowdfunded product, that might be tangible or intangible. Taking games in general as a comparison point, 'play' is only one meaning-making practice, and some of the other modes of meaning-making might be buying, collecting, painting miniatures, watching, socialising, and so on.

It is good to remember that business studies typically exert a certain kind of focus on crowdfunding, i.e. one that fails to acknowledge the wider socio-cultural impact the model might have on backers. Most cultural studies researchers would attach these extended activities – both from creator and backer perspectives – to

crowdfunding, as a cultural phenomenon and otherwise. However, looking at some of the cultural studies journal articles on crowdfunding shows that scholars in this field opt not to give any kind of definition for the concept (e.g. Smith 2015; Scott 2015), perhaps feeling that this would significantly reduce the conceptualisation of the research object at hand, the qualitative variety and depth of which is often the target of these articles. I tend to agree with this view, but at the same time I use some of the more inclusive definitions taken from business studies (e.g. Schwienbacher and Larralde 2010) as a starting point for contrasting and adding to the existing literature on crowdfunding.

Reward-based crowdfunding

This dissertation is mostly focused on reward-based crowdfunding. In the case of funding the products of cultural and creative industries, reward-based crowdfunding is the most typical crowdfunding model (used for example by Kickstarter). When crowdfunding a product or a service such as a game, the creator typically presents a prototype or a design document for the game on a project site. Nearly always, backers are offered the complete game as a reward for their contribution as soon as it is finished. Typically, the project creator creates a pitch video in which they describe the game they would like to make, the skills and assets that prove they can actually execute the plan, and possible concept art, alpha footage, or a prototype of the early version of the game.

Funding is based on a tiered system, where consecutive funding tiers rise in cost, at the same time offering more or better rewards. With game campaigns, the lowest reward tier is typically set at $10-20 offering a digital download of the game when it is eventually ready[2] – a sum that is mostly in line with the average cost of a new game on digital storefronts such as Steam. At the same time, higher reward tiers might offer a physical game copy, a soundtrack, signed artwork, and so on. In most cases, backers can also donate a sum below the lowest tier. This will still give them access to project updates – which can be backer-exclusive – and allows them to be listed as backers on the platform site. The project creator gets to keep everything they receive on top of their minimum goal. Typically, gradually rising ‘stretch goals’ are used to describe how the project will use the extra funds should any be collected. In most

[2] A constantly updated list compiled by myself tracking crowdfunded games released on Steam indicates that the average lowest cost for getting a game from a games crowdfunding campaign is US$14,94 (based on 411 games).

cases, stretch goals expand and flesh out the game in various ways. Additionally, many campaigns sell add-on content that is not included in the reward tiers, yet pledging for that content still raises the overall funding of the project – and therefore adds to the momentum that most projects strive towards.

Due to the relative popularity of dedicated crowdfunding platforms, the network effects associated with online platforms, and the marketing advantage gained from them, it is easy to assume that a vast majority of all crowdfunding projects now use crowdfunding platforms instead of opting to run a campaign on private websites. USA-based Kickstarter employs the reward-based crowdfunding model – although backers are able to donate a small sum without any kind of reward, too – and advertises itself as the largest crowdfunding platform for creative projects. In terms of visibility and project count, Kickstarter has been a clear front runner for game projects in the western world, with other US crowdfunding platforms having relatively few, if any, game projects. For project creators, Kickstarter is available directly in the US, the UK, Canada, Australia, New Zealand, the Netherlands, Denmark, Sweden, Norway, Ireland, Germany, Spain, France, Austria, Belgium, Luxembourg, Switzerland, Italy, Singapore, Hong Kong, Mexico and Japan – i.e. creators can use the local currency.[3] It is possible, however, to set up projects from other countries too. Backers can fund projects from where ever, although projects often have some kind of limitations as to where they choose to ship their rewards and a variance on how much the shipping will cost.

In addition to Kickstarter, there are hundreds of other similar services working around the world, and many of these platforms are more specified e.g. in terms of their funding subcategory, funding model or language area. For example, Fig.co (US) is a curated crowdfunding platform (i.e. the projects are hand-picked by the site staff) that is concentrated only on digital games and allows equity crowdfunding. GoFundMe (US) is one of the largest platforms in the world and is concentrated on social causes. Ulule is a French crowdfunding platform with a wide variety of projects and has for example been used to successfully launch the first commercial digital game from French speaking Cameroon. In different regions around the globe, different legislation and regulations might dictate what kind of crowdfunding is allowed. For example, in Finland donation-based crowdfunding is prohibited, as it is illegal to ask for funds without offering something in return (and therefore Kickstarter, for example, cannot launch a Finnish site without alterations to its base

[3] During my research period (2015-2019), the overwhelming majority of projects originated from the US (i.e. had chosen the US dollar for their currency). However, towards the end of the period projects from other currency regions were on a steady rise.

model). In addition to the crowdfunding platforms, there are also numerous intermediaries within the crowdfunding ecosystem, such as services that handle backer pledges and reward fulfilment (further elaborated in Chapter 4.1).

Games crowdfunding

Game crowdfunding on Kickstarter has steadily grown from the launch of the service in 2009, with $1B pledged for games by 3.6 million backers during the lifespan of the service (up until the end of 2019) (Kickstarter 2020). In 2019 – the best year for game projects in the site history –, 3,731 game projects were successfully funded (Bidaux 2020) and over $219M was raised by 1,052,965 backers (Kickstarter 2020). For digital games, the golden age of Kickstarter began in earnest in 2012. This was the beginning of a period that lasted roughly four years during which the majority of the most well-known, high-profile game campaigns were funded, many with record-breaking results. Despite the high funding numbers of Kickstarted games, digital games on the platform have declined in number for several years now. At the same time, tabletop games have become one of the largest single categories on the platform, single-handedly dominating the larger 'Games' category. Kickstarter releases its own numbers, and project counts and money raised in different categories (both successful and unsuccessful) are available quite openly. There are also other services such as ICO Partners (a game industry consulting service) and Kicktraq.com (a Kickstarter statistics site) that provide analysis on the data released by Kickstarter. To account for the decline in game project numbers on Kickstarter via the emergence of dedicated games crowdfunding platforms, ICO Partners have also analysed Kickstarter data in conjunction with data from Fig.co (Bidaux 2019). However, while some very interesting game projects have been launched through Fig.co, the overall number of projects and funding on the platform is considerably low.

The crowdfunding model provides game developers with a financing channel that is seemingly free from publisher influence. In contrast to the traditional publishing model where the publisher has typically kept developers and players far apart (Kerr, 2017, 71), many developers use crowdfunding as a means to address the gaming audience directly, asking gamers whether they would like to see the proposed game. As such, crowdfunding platforms are ideal channels for identifying and addressing niche game audiences. Especially in the early years of the phenomenon, an emancipatory rhetoric was linked to crowdfunding platforms (Planells 2017).

In terms of digital games, crowdfunding on Kickstarter can be considered as a phenomenon that blends into other crowdsourcing and crowdfunding phenomena. These include Steam Early Access, the former Steam Greenlight, and generally speaking, games released as public beta-versions and subsequently tweaked based on user feedback. Steam Early Access allows game developers to put a mid-development version of their game for sale on Steam, for example making it possible to continue development through those sales. Early Access is very popular with PC game developers and has produced a high number of very successful games. The biggest difference between it and crowdfunding is that those Early Access games that are able to attract any attention are generally speaking further along in the development cycle, as the model relies on selling a prototype that is already fun to play for the end user. In crowdfunding, however, an advanced prototype aims be more of a vertical slice that looks good and is able to sell the game before it is played.

The now defunct Steam Greenlight was a crowdsourced system where users voted for user-submitted, in-development game projects to decide which of them would be chosen for the Steam marketplace. Many game projects used Greenlight and Early Access together with Kickstarter, for example advertising their game to be Greenlit or in Early Access on their Kickstarter project page. Additionally, other crowdfunding platforms used for game projects have different characteristics. For example, Fig.co gives the possibility to offer equity in the project in exchange for funding. Equity-based crowdfunding typically deals with larger sums of money and the funding goal might be reached with fewer 'professional' investments. As a result, this might lead to a project that does not need to deal with the 'crowd' as much as a typical reward-based game project – therefore significantly changing the nature of crowdfunding. Table 1 lays out the characteristics of crowdfunding next to these related areas:

Table 1. Different types of crowdsourced game production models

Production model	Crowdfunding	Creator gets	Creator requirements
Kickstarter	Reward-based	Funding, user feedback, testing, grass-roots marketing, exposure, large network benefits from the platform	Deliver the complete product and possible other rewards in promised timetable, regular updates

Fig.co	Curated, reward-based, equity-based	Curation, funding, user feedback, testing, grass-roots marketing, exposure, small network benefits from the platform	Deliver the complete product and possible other rewards in promised timetable, regular updates
Steam Early Access	Reward-based (beta release and/or full version)	Funding (through sales), user feedback, testing, grass-roots marketing, exposure	An advanced, playable version of the game, to attract user attention
Steam Greenlight*		Market access, user feedback	
Public beta-releases		User feedback, testing	

*now defunct

Beyond digital games crowdfunding, it is important to make a note on the crowdfunding of tabletop games. Currently, crowdfunding for tabletop gaming is stronger than ever. On Kickstarter, the number of successfully funded tabletop gaming projects and the amount of funds they gather have grown every year since the launch of the platform, with $176M collected in 2019 alone. Two thirds of all the projects in the category succeed (Bidaux 2020). The success of the sector is interesting in itself and there are many questions that relate to this, for example: Why is crowdfunding such a good match with tabletop gaming? Is crowdfunding changing the status quo of the industry centred around tabletop gaming? What does the success of the sector tell us about the development and production of gaming related goods that require that creators estimate print run sizes and adjust physical manufacturing accordingly? At the same time, it is important to pay attention to the flipside of the phenomenon, i.e. what are the negative aspects of a tabletop culture dominated by crowdfunding? While some of these questions are touched on in Article I and the results chapters 4.1 and 4.3 of this dissertation, the main focus of this dissertation is on digital games crowdfunding, consequently leaving the area of tabletop games crowdfunding open for future research.

3.2 Traditional game industry and recent changes

During the mid-1980s, Nintendo introduced a system for how the mainstream game industry would work thereon. This was an update of the game industry dominated by Atari in the late 1970s and early 1980s, based on a strong control of the platform holders and (later) game publishers. Due to the immense popularity of the Nintendo Entertainment System (NES), both the production network actors and Nintendo's competitors were forced to adapt to this kind of production and publishing model (Altice 2015; Arsenault 2017). Subsequently, from the 1980s up until the turn of the millennium, the games production network was largely based on an incremental value chain (Kline et al. 2003), comprised of platform holders, publishers, developers, distributors and retailers (Johns 2006). Additionally, there were ad hoc parties such as venture capitalists and government agencies providing prototype funding (Kerr 2006, 83). Figure 5 displays this traditional game industry value chain with its interconnections.

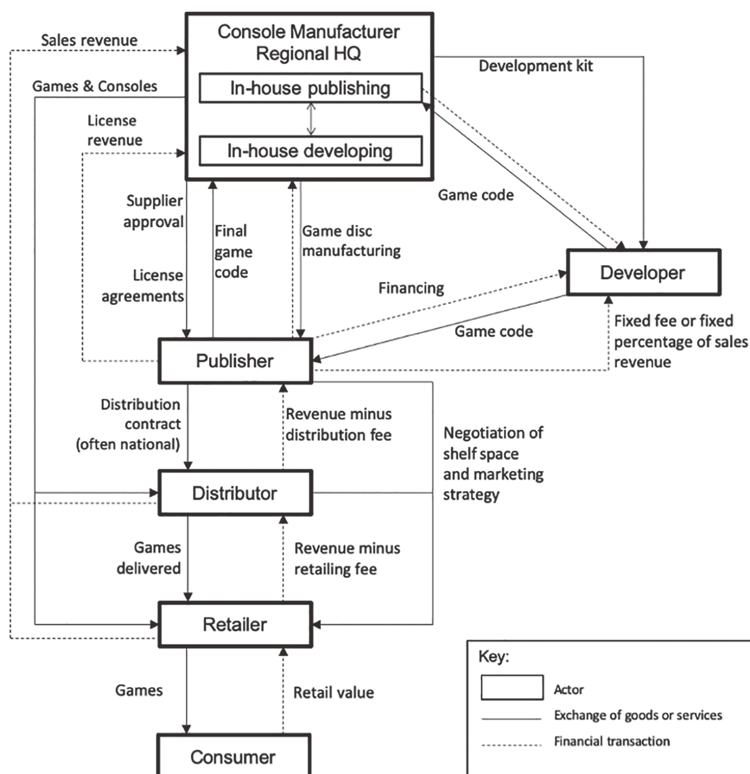

Figure 5. Interconnections between actors in the digital games production network (Johns, 2006)

This traditional value chain model is still largely in place for the biggest blockbusters, the so-called triple-A games, with the publisher as a central broker or a "value chain governor" supervising production areas and controlling financing (Nieborg 2011; Deuze et al. 2007). While projects' core activities are controlled by the publishers, non-core services are outsourced (Vanderhoef & Curtin 2016, 201; Kerr 2017, 154, 185). Publishers habitually demand the IP rights as a prerequisite for financing a game (Nieborg 2011). In most cases the developer needs to showcase an advanced prototype of the game in order to secure a publishing deal. This has often resulted in the developer self-financing a prototype with a debt (Kerr 2006, 81), and then becoming obligated to agree to publisher's terms in order to secure financing that can be used to pay back that debt and start developing the game. In this traditional model, the profit share for the developer has remained around 10%.

Since the turn of the millennium, the most notable techno-economic transitions shaping the game industry have been the introduction of online connected game consoles, the digital distribution of games, and the proliferation of game platforms. Digital distribution platforms such as Valve's Steam and Apple's App Store have helped introduce easy, reliable and fast plug-and-play gaming to increasingly wide audiences. Digital distribution has provided publishers with even more control over the value chain in utilising games as services (Nieborg 2014; see also Stenros & Sotamaa 2009). However, at the same time it has allowed developers to directly negotiate contracts with platform holders, removing the need for a publisher from the production chain (Sotamaa et al. 2011). Thus, it would seem that digital distribution offers a more streamlined, efficient and direct model for selling digital games (see Figure 6) for a streamlined production network.

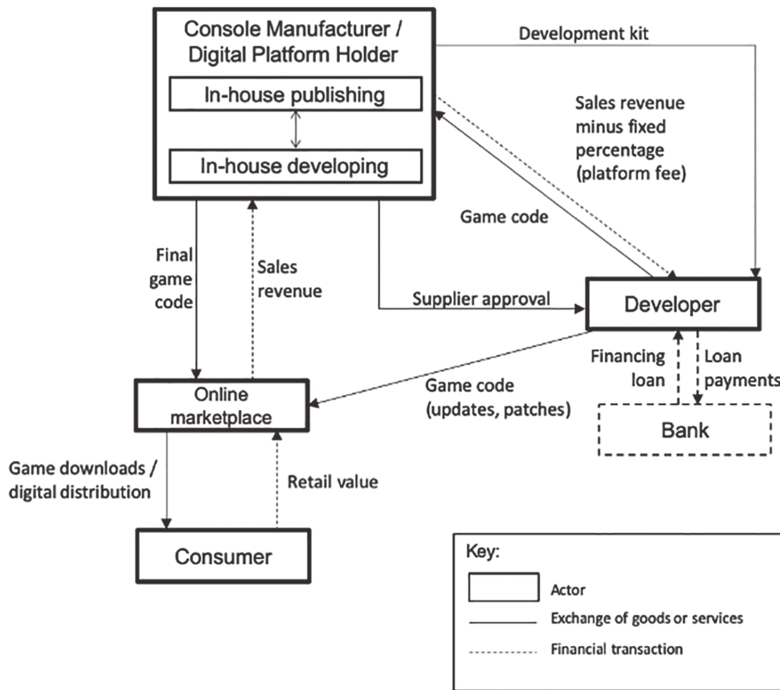

Figure 6. Streamlined production network for digital distribution

In this new streamlined arrangement, the developer can end up having a significantly larger share of the revenue, up to 70% (Sotamaa et al. 2011), by cutting out production network middlemen like the publisher and the retailer. Of course, platform holders sometimes also act as game publishers, and thus might be in a publishing deal with the developer that reduces the share that the developer gets. More commonly though, the deal the platform holder makes with a game developer is just for distribution. Essentially, this means that the platform holder takes a fixed percentage fee (typically around 30%) of each digital game copy sold on the platform. Overall, digital distribution, online connected game consoles, and the increasing number of accessible game platforms such as smart devices have significantly re-shaped the landscape of the global game industries. One consequence of this re-shaping has been the rise and success of independent game production.

Independent game production

Even though this dissertation is not focused on studying independent game production in itself, this area needs a short, focused look due to its overlap with games crowdfunding. From a broad perspective, independent game production is the area of game production that crowdfunding has touched the most. The phenomenon of the games crowdfunding model has a deep connection with the premise of reclaiming financial independence from the traditional game production system, which formed the hegemonic organisation within the business from 1980s up until 2010s (for an overview, see e.g. Johns 2006; Kerr 2006; Nieborg 2011). It is clear that games crowdfunding exists in a relationship with independent game development. As such, the matter of 'independence' is at the heart of game crowdfunding and needs to be discussed by any scholarly inquiry aiming to tackle the topic. However, a closer look at the topic of independent game production reveals problems in this conceptualisation.

The line between the 'traditional' triple-A game industry and the industry that falls outside of it has been blurring all the time, at least since the introduction of digital distribution. In simple terms, any game developer who is not owned by another company (e.g. a publisher)[4] could be termed as independent. However, there are several large game developers who produce games at a regular interval exclusively or almost exclusively for large publishers on a contract basis. The publisher then finances the development process in exchange for partial or complete ownership over the produced game (e.g. its IP rights). It is a commonly held sentiment within game playing audiences that these kinds of companies are therefore not 'independent' in the same sense as for example developers who are financing and publishing their games by themselves.

Concentrating on the traditional large-scale publishing model, Nieborg (2011) deems that any game that receives a boxed release is a AAA-game. This recalls a time when the status of a game production as a 'serious' release worth noting was in direct correlation with the publisher's ability to publish the game in game stores – i.e. to be able to work within the hegemonic organisation of the established game industry comprised of developers, platform holders, publishers, distributors and retailers. For many scholars at this point, independent meant decidedly small game productions. Donovan (2010) for example describes the beginnings of independent game production based on the likes of *Alien Hominid* (2002), a browser game coded in

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[4] Most large publishers such as Electronic Arts and Activision-Blizzard have several development studios owned by and producing games for them (see e.g. Vanderhoef & Curtin 2016).

Flash. As a result of vertical integration by platform holders and the meteoric rise of download-only platforms (like iOS and Android mobile devices), game releasing has since moved forcefully to favour digital distribution. Many of the largest titles in the current landscape (in 2020), such as *Apex Legends* (2019, Electronic Arts) and *Clash Royale* (2016, Supercell) are almost entirely digitally distributed, this way greatly undermining the importance of a physical release. Further blurring the notion of boxed AAA-games as comprising the 'mainstream' game industry, the entire Australian game industry transformed from a dominantly AAA-industry to independent game production as a consequence of the 2008 financial crisis and the subsequent currency fluctuation (Apperley & Golding 2015, 61; Keogh 2019b).

Maria Garda and Paweł Grabarczyk (2016) point out that there has been no consensus within game studies on the definition of either an "indie game" or an "independent game". Scholars such as Nadav Lipkin (2013) and Jennifer Whitson (2013) have argued that the terms are used to denote varying things based on who uses them: sometimes they refer to the financial situation of the developer, the aesthetics of the game, the "attitude" of the production team, or even the size or composition of the team. Specifically talking about "independent" game production, Garda and Grabarczyk (2016) conclude that there are, in fact, three types of independence that current game studies refer to. First, financing independence refers to being independent from outside financing, i.e. when a developer for example spends their own savings to develop the game. Second, publisher independence is used to refer to a developer's ability to self-publish their game without a publisher. Third, creative independence refers to being free of audience expectations in terms of game content, i.e. a developer develops a game "for themselves". The concept of "indie game", on the other hand, is a label that denotes a specific, narrower part of "independent" game phenomenon, "namely a specific kind of independent game that has emerged around mid-2000s". Garda and Grabarczyk see that for many studies, "indie game" denotes to an unspecified combination of contingent properties or "indie markers" such as a small team size, digital distribution, retro style, small game size, and specific middleware (Garda & Grabarczyk 2016).

This more accurate definition of "independent" and "indie" also helps when defining games crowdfunding. On a basic level, games crowdfunding means publisher independence, also identified in the developer parlance surrounding the model (cf. Planells 2017). In terms of financing, crowdfunding projects are not independent, as the financing is gathered from the backer community and the project creator can be held liable towards fulfilling the promises made to that community. Thus, a reward-based crowdfunding project could be argued to be in financial debt

to its backers – a debt that is paid back as completed products. It is noteworthy that there are also projects that have actually pre-gathered funding to develop the target game and use crowdfunding e.g. to finance a physical print run. Nevertheless, these projects enter into a more or less binding financial agreement with the backer community, one that needs to be fulfilled. Lastly, crowdfunding projects are rarely, if ever, creatively independent from their backers, as projects are based on promising a specific kind of game to the backers who habitually demand that these goals are met to the best of developer's abilities. There are several project examples demonstrating that if creators for whatever reason change the artistic course of the game mid-development, they infuriate and/or alienate a large part of the backer community.

Stepping aside the matter of definition, during my research period I have heard experts working in the field arguing that crowdfunding is simply a tool of independent game production (a tool for marketing, for example). These opinions directly contest the meaning of crowdfunding as a broad production model, and run contrary to the stance of this dissertation. Arguing for a broader definition of crowdfunding is at the heart of this study, and I hope to have shown by the end of the dissertation that crowdfunding is indeed more than just a tool for independent game production (which is certainly one of its functions).

3.3 In search of games crowdfunding studies

In this section I go over the key research and theories that frame the analysis presented in Chapter 4. When I received my first research funding to study games crowdfunding in the beginning of 2015, there were no academic articles specifically focused on the crowdfunding of games. Since then, only a handful of articles have appeared, even if one searches across disciplines. Consequently, in addition to going over the few articles concentrated on games crowdfunding, this research literature section takes a look at a few adjacent areas that offer special significance to games crowdfunding when approaching it from a political economy perspective. First, I briefly discuss the relationship of cultural studies, game studies and the emerging research area of game production studies, and where my research is positioned among these domains. Second, I go over a few relevant studies within game production studies. I specifically want to highlight studies on the organisation and political economy of game industries, the ongoing platformisation of cultural production (effects on cultural production, structures and work in cultural

industries), and participative audiences and emerging forms of consumption within game cultures. Third, I go over a few selected studies on crowdfunding in the wider cultural industries, specifically within the film and music industries. Finally, I look at business studies centred on crowdfunding that relate to my research, including studies focused on games crowdfunding, backer motivations for participation, multi-sided markets, and network effects.

Cultural studies, game studies and game production studies

Games are an increasingly visible part of the contemporary global cultural landscape, with multiple, highly specified sub-cultures. Game production is a part of the wider field of cultural production. It shares key areas of interest with the music and film industries, for instance how the industries are organised and issues of labour. Like these neighbouring areas, game production can be studied from the viewpoints of media studies and cultural studies, but also from the more specified angles of game studies, and more recently, game production studies.

During the last two decades, an emerging body of literature within game studies has focused on the contexts of game production. These academic papers, conventions and research networks have concentrated on issues such as game industry structures, how power and money is concentrated within those structures, the working conditions of game creators, unionisation, studio practices, and the emerging demands of new media work for labourers (Sotamaa & Švelch 2020), to highlight only the tip of the iceberg. The fact that new efforts are being concentrated on issues of production context and working conditions in games studies is an important development, as traditionally they have been overlooked in favour of games and players. Arguing for the research on game production, Whitson et al. (2018) remind that "those interested in cultural production rarely reflect upon games, while digital games researchers typically ignore industry and production aspects". Instead of a foregrounded perspective, the production context has been an undercurrent in the discussions, and we have had relatively little and/or superficial discussion on who actually makes the games and who finances them.

So what is the relationship between cultural studies and game studies, and how are game studies and game production studies related? Many will argue that rather than using the lens of cultural studies to examine games, any serious inquiry into the matters of game production needs to consider the cultural specificity of games. This means understanding the special characteristics of games and what theoretic and methodological approaches are needed to study them. Within game studies, some

classic texts of game production combine perspectives of cultural studies, political economy of media, and various other approaches to account for the technological nature of games (see e.g. Kline et al. 2003). For these studies, the combination of those perspectives accounts for the cultural specificity of games.

Elaborating on the special position of game studies next to cultural studies, Nieborg and Hermes (2008) argue that digital games "are woven more deeply into the corporate-capitalist web" than other forms of culture examined by cultural studies. In digital games, more than anywhere else, technology and innovation, and the governance and exploitation of free labour that link to these issues are central themes (ibid.). Because of this – and it is a development that seems only to escalate – the contexts and political economy of game production become more and more relevant in articulating and understanding other parts of game cultures. While initially many of the other areas of gaming culture might seem to have nothing to do with issues of game production, more and more the techno-economic trajectories that surround us within the datafied media landscape dictate and shape all of the parts of game use. This is further accentuated in a "ludic society" (Zimmerman 2015; Mäyrä 2017) where the boundaries between what belongs to gaming (and the capital and technology behind it), and what does not, become increasingly blurred.

If we consider further the cultural specificity of games, games are at the forefront in terms of the issues described above, with corporate-capital governance, the complete datafication of society, and labour issues of this kind blurring their environment. To use an often-used proverb, games are the canary in a coal mine for both the wider cultural industries and the general media landscape, that can be observed to predict future techno-economic trajectories for other sectors. Games, game industries, and game production studies work as a condensing lens, both on a macro-level and within more specific focus areas such as the techno-capitalist-cultural phenomenological landscape surrounding crowdfunding. As such, the production context is an essential part of the wider game culture and game studies.

Many of the game studies centred on the production context have a theoretical background both in cultural studies and the political economy of the gaming media, but also in production studies of other media (Kline et al. 2003; Kerr 2017, 2006), and a study on game production would do well to consider what could we learn from them. Scholarship originating from film and media production studies (or simply 'production studies') can certainly contribute to game production studies. This is true now more than ever, as cultural production and consumption is platformised across the media landscape, thus unifying many of the underlying arguments concerning markets, distribution and the concentration of power on a conglomerate level. First,

production studies on film and TV have been in the vanguard highlighting a below-the-line workforce, and their often invisible positions within production structures (Caldwell 2008; Mayer 2011). For Mayer (2009), production studies "captures […] the ways that power operates locally through media production to reproduce social hierarchies and inequalities at the level of daily interactions." She continues:

> "Production studies […] "ground" social theories by showing us how specific production sites, actors, or activities tell us larger lessons about workers, their practices, and the role of their labours in relation to politics, economics, and culture. It is this connection, between the micro contexts and the macro forces, which illuminates the social implications in an otherwise narrow case study and modifies the grand claims that have become commonplace regarding the role of media in society. It is also this connection between macro and micro that is so frequently lost in the efforts to describe the current media landscape, its interconnected industries, and its networks of professionals."

There have been calls for a critical analysis of video game culture that would incorporate it within a larger media landscape. Shaw (2010) implored scholars to investigate "the interactions between culture, technological design, and user interfaces", while interweaving questions of larger social and ideological structures, gender and class, and national and transnational industries. She instructs researchers to study active audiences and dominant ideologies together (Shaw, 2010, 413). As such, we should work towards identifying a research area of game production studies, but at the same time we should not define it as being separate from the rest of the cultural production landscape. Again, in the contemporary media landscape, this is made easier by techno-economic convergence, i.e. such a large part of culture, identity formation, cultural production, and the commerce existing on online platforms, governed by transnational information network conglomerates such as Apple, Google and Facebook. As a result, the networks of game production become wider and more dispersed due to emerging tasks, professions, intermediaries and technologies. Consequently, what belongs in 'game industry' or 'game production' becomes increasingly blurred.

Scholars like Mayer (2009; 2011; 2016), Banks and Conor (Banks et al. 2016) and Caldwell (2013; 2008) have concentrated on countering those views on Hollywood production that highlight only the marquee names – the above-the-line workers – instead concentrating on the existing and emerging production work that repeatedly gets ignored as non-essential and even uninteresting. This has a clear parallel with game production studies which only recently have woken up to the importance of below-the-line work. This is partly because in the platform economics, new sites of production are rapidly emerging, and the scholarship is scrambling to broaden its

definition of what belongs in game production and game work. Mayer (2016) asserts that "both production and audience studies have to continually reassert the boundaries of the cultures they seek to describe". This is certainly true with a phenomenon like crowdfunding, which is still "live", constantly evolving in the ways producers and audiences use it, and determining and re-determining which side of the 'border' each individual belongs to. This "reaffirms that audiences and producers are also and have always been social constructions, represented as unified groupings to serve industrial needs" (Mayer 2016).

The area of game production should be acknowledged as one of the key sites within the multitude of gaming cultures. How, why, when and where games are produced matters. I will return to the topic of below-the-line work in the discussion section of the dissertation, further elaborating how games crowdfunding presents an example of such work emerging in a platformised work environment. Having outlined the general relationship between cultural studies, production studies and game production studies, I now turn to review research on some of the key areas of games production that hold an importance to studying games crowdfunding. These key areas include the structure of the games industry, the platformisation of cultural production, and the blurring boundaries between consumption and production.

3.3.1 Game production studies

While there are only a handful of full-length books chiefly focused on game production aspects (e.g. Kline et al. 2003; Dyer-Witheford & de Peuter 2009; Kerr 2006, 2017), they are growing in number, as well as the much more numerous journal and conference articles centred on the topic. During the last few years, a growing number of games researchers and research consortiums have directly started calling this body of literature 'game production studies' (see e.g. Jørgensen 2017; de Smale et al. 2017; Keogh 2019; Sotamaa & Švelch 2020). No such research area yet exists in an official capacity (as far as this writer is aware) - rather 'game production studies' is a conceptualisation of current and recent work with a specific focus, by which a growing number of researchers hope to inform future research directions.

Evaluating the emerging field of game production studies from a literature-review stand point, there are more and more varied standpoints and perspectives to take, from industry structure examinations, to studio ethnographies, to inquiries into intricate design practices. The connecting tissue between these studies relevant to this dissertation is the use of the political economy perspective within analyses (often

mixed with other theoretical backgrounds). Originating from the Critical Theory of the Frankfurt School, political economy of the media has a naturally critical stance towards the organisation and functions of cultural production. The classic tradition of political economy centres on the dangers of a mass-commercialisation of cultural products. Since its inception, later approaches have both added to and criticised it, mainly due to it downplaying the importance of the user.

In her study on global game production, Aphra Kerr (2017) distinguishes between at least three current traditions of political economy: the North American approach, the autonomist labour tradition, and the European cultural industries approach. The North American tradition is concentrated on ownership and concentration, while the European cultural industries tradition is more specifically focused on the structures of the industry and the imbalances between companies (ibid., 5). Like this dissertation, Kerr draws inspiration from the European tradition, adding that it pays attention to the organization of production, experiences of workers, the texts and content that are produced, and the audiences involved (Miège 1989; Hesmondhalgh & Baker 2011; Kraidy 2005; in Kerr 2017, 5). The European approach also focuses on the role of the state and transnational organisations and public agencies as mediators, regulators and promoters of cultural production. What unites these and other scholars from the European tradition, such as Garnham (2000) and Bustamante (2004), is that "they attempt to situate the cultural industries in the broader context of globalisation and late capitalism" (Kerr 2017, 5). In addition to the European tradition, the North American approach, too, is useful due to its emphasis on ownership (Mosco 2009), as the games crowdfunding model is premised on retaining the IP rights to the crowdfunded games. However, while a focus on ownership and concentration is useful for the contextualising parts of this research, the empirical parts of this study are more concerned with the focus areas of the European cultural industries approach.

Organisation and the political economy of traditional game production

Looking at the often-cited game production studies, one of the first and well-known works to concentrate on the game industries is *Digital Play* (2003) by Stephen Kline, Nick Dyer-Witheford and Greig de Peuter. Combining approaches from cultural studies, the political economy of media, and media theory, *Digital Play* is one of the few books to cover the (then current) game industry in a more holistic manner, paying equal attention to the areas of technology, culture and marketing. Similar to later books by Kerr (2006; 2017) – and an oft-cited article by Jennifer Johns (2006)

–, *Digital Play* draws attention to how the traditional game industry is organised in a top-down way, with platform holders and publishers wielding most of the power and reaping most of the profit, despite the crucial role of the game developer in creating the intellectual property (often considered the most valuable element of game creation). All three studies highlight the precarious position of the game developer within the digital games industry ecosystem. Among the researchers who have built on this work, David Nieborg has emphasised this precarity through several studies concentrated on the structure and hegemonic nature of the AAA console game industry (Nieborg 2011, 2014).

Many of these studies have drawn links between the game industry and the wider cultural industries, listing characteristics of cultural industry work shared between them, specifically the high risk of producing content; tension between creativity and profit; high production and low reproduction costs; semi-public nature of the goods; and the artificial construction of scarcity (Kerr 2006; Hesmondhalgh 2013, 26-33). Attention has also been placed on the fact that the game industry has assumed practices from other industries, such as minimising risk through formatting, licensing and sequels (Kline et al. 2003). This links to one of the perpetual themes of the political economy of digital games, i.e. the continued tendency of the larger game industry to move the risk of production forward (Kerr 2006; Kline et al. 2003; Whitson et al. 2018; Lolli 2018). I will return to the topic in connection to the "spirits of capitalism" (Boltanski & Chiapello 2005) of games crowdfunding in the discussion section of the dissertation.

Drawing critical attention to a more granular level of game work, O'Donnell (2014) delivers an important studio ethnography examining the triple-A game development culture. A key result of the study is to underscore the secrecy that surrounds that development culture and hinders the game work in the absence of shared, standardised development platforms. O'Donnell also draws attention to work roles within AAA development, highlighting the relationships between existing production roles and the emergence of new professions that need to be created to fill the gaps in the evolving production culture. The emerging intermediary positions can also be witnessed in games crowdfunding, and I will return to the topic in Chapter 4.1. Researchers like Kerr (2017) have argued for the importance of studying the organisation of game production also in terms of regulation (on national, European, trans-Atlantic and global levels). O'Donnell's study (2014) helps to understand the measure and significance of outsourcing within the global game industry, something that later, more specified studies have importantly elaborated on (e.g. Ozimek 2019).

Similar to the present study, several game production studies have concentrated on the changes emerging technologies have introduced to the structure and organisation of game production. Talking about the emerging service paradigm, Stenros and Sotamaa (2009) detailed how these emerging opportunities allowed studios to maintain a continued service relationship with the player through the introduction of games-as-services. David Nieborg (2011) has described how the service model has allowed publishers to gain more dominance over the value chain, whereby digital distribution entirely sidesteps retail stores and physical distribution channels. Online connected consoles have allowed publishers to extend games through downloadable add-on content (Nieborg 2014). This in turn, has allowed feeding the console players new content and promotions through the games themselves (see e.g. Nieborg 2014; Tyni et al. 2011). Kerr (2017, 6) points out that digital games industries have imported many precarious industry practices from other cultural industries, and been the first to embrace new practices, such as digital distribution, internet intermediaries and amateur content creation that have opened up new emancipatory opportunities for game work.

Moving on from the traditional game industry

In this section I will first discuss research on independent game production, and a capitalist ethos related to it and games crowdfunding, after which I highlight 'production logics' (Kerr 2017; Miège 1989) as a useful conceptualisation for capturing contemporary modes of game production. I will then return the concept of production logic in Chapter 4.1., where I will expand on the model by introducing a games crowdfunding production logic.

Game industries have been at the forefront in developing new business models on the emerging techno-economical frameworks, and so moving towards platform capitalism. Like this dissertation, many of the more recent game production studies have concentrated on the ways that new technologies augment, change or disrupt the traditional game industry and its political economy. One sector that the new technologies have significantly affected has been the emerging opportunities and their development for independent games, leading to a lot of academic research examining the work life, labour issues and political economy of independent game creators. Some of the most prolific researchers with a focus on independent game production cultures have been Jennifer Whitson (2012, 2018, 2019), Felan Parker (2012), and Bart Simon (2013). Among other issues, they have drawn critical attention to the Indie Megabooth as a forceful cultural intermediary. Indie

Megabooth, like the Independent Game Festival, has had an increasingly important role in structuring the North-American independent game development scene, in terms of gatekeeping, worker networks and the related political economy (Parker et al. 2018). Furthermore, examining the evolving game production network of independent game developers, they conclude that independent developers are struggling to manage their production processes without the kinds of professional producers used in the traditional game publishing sector (Whitson et al. 2018). Adding to this theme of game industry transformation, Chris Young (2018) explored the game work of independent game developers and other 'everyday gamemakers', drawing critical attention to which workers and what kinds of work we actually see as belonging to the 'game industry'. This is an ongoing question, prompting a further question of what are the core competencies of game making today, given that many company's most crucial personnel are people like data analysts and community managers? The emerging professions within the games crowdfunding model, too, expand on these notions of who should we consider to be a part of game industry, and I will further elaborate on this in the results and discussion chapters.

In studying the establishing culture of independent game production, John Vanderhoef (2016) argued that despite intentions to be subversive, in many ways, independent game making conforms to the neoliberalist logic of the 'mainstream' game industry. Already in 2003, Kline et al. argued that the traditional game industry produced the ideal post-Fordist commodity – "instantaneous, experiential, fluid, flexible, heterogeneous, customized, portable, and permeated by a fashion with form and style" (Kline et al. 2003, 74). Elaborating on this, Whitson (2019) argues that the traditional game industry exemplified the Fordist factory model. Drawing from Boltanski and Chiapello's (2005) theory of three different 'spirits' of capitalist work place organisation, she sees the traditional game industry model as corresponding with the second spirit, a model that defined the "good life" of the Fordist era. In moving away from the traditional game industry, game industries have moved to a third spirit, one based on "decentralised, lean, and agile networked companies". While there are many game industry sub-sectors that conform to this description, it seems quite evident that contemporary independent game development epitomises this new 'spirit of capitalism' by embracing the new technologies and developing new business models on top of them (cf. Kerr 2017, 6; cited above). Namely, where small teams assume most of the risk and work diligently to support an overarching capitalist commodity production system, connected together by central platforms. Importantly, one of the consequences of this new spirit of capitalism is that game production is dispersed far and wide into self-governed nodes that elude centralised

unionisation and work place governance. Crowdfunding more or less epitomises this kind of ethos, an argument I will return to in the discussion.

Studying game production has increased in scope and difficulty, partly because new sites of game production are appearing everywhere, with new kinds of companies entering the fray here and there. The proliferation of new technologies and the branching industry models they open up has prompted scholarship to think about the 'game industry' rather in a plural form - 'game industries' (reflecting a similar discussion on 'game cultures' versus 'game culture'; Sotamaa 2009). In a landscape of multiple, diverging game industries based on increasingly different business propositions and financial models, it has become increasingly difficult to put forward research that captures the contemporary landscape in any comprehensive way. One of the better conceptual models to set the wider production landscape (for the purposes of this dissertation) is the one used by Kerr (2017), based on 'production logics'. Building on Miège (1989) and Lacroix and Tremblay (1997), Kerr utilises the lens of production logic to illustrate and identify "the key market and institutional characteristics structuring different types of games production", focusing on the high-level market conditions surrounding and shaping production (Kerr, 2017, 78). Kerr defines production logics as a "relatively stable set of institutional relationships generated by the commodification of cultural production" (2017, 15). Paying attention specifically to the central brokers, the economic chain / network, creative professions, sales and revenue, and market characteristics, she identifies five main logics of cultural production within the current digital games industry (2017, 68-74):

- *Publishing logic* – the classic game publishing logic, still mainly used with triple-A game production; paid up-front, premium games; fire-and-forget;

- *Flow logic* – a flow of content updates to keep players engaged, e.g. subscription based MMOGs; radio being an early example;

- *Club logic* – A logic mainly concerned with circulation and distribution; a continuous service with an 'all-you-can-play' catalogue of content, based e.g. on monthly subscription;

- *Performance logic* – A logic mainly concerned with circulation and use; regular live events with performing gameplay to an audience as a source of revenue, e.g. through YouTube, Twitch or in tournaments;

- *Platform logic* – based on the central position of internet intermediaries, with equal importance placed on mobile devices, the continuous flow of data, algorithms, and the free-to-play business model.

These logics are interwoven and influence each other. Furthermore, Kerr implies that emerging production models can be explained with these logics or at least by combining elements from them (2017, 68, 78). As such, they work for capturing various phenomena, such as crowdfunding as a production model for games from a broader standpoint, e.g. that crowdfunding is not just funding or a platform, but other things too. I will return to this notion in the results chapter 4.1. where I introduce an additional logic, the games crowdfunding production logic, an augmented combination of publishing and platform logics. As the different production logics have been more prominent during different phases in time, they illustrate the evolution of game production and help to understand how emerging trajectories come together to form new logics. The publishing logic is the traditional (oldest) game publishing logic, which was later followed by the flow logic, after which the club, performance and platform logics arrived on the scene. While performance and club logics were outlier logics only a couple of years ago, now they are mainstream with the massive rise of eSports and various 'Netflix-for-games' types of services, such as Game Pass and Apple Arcade.

Platform logic and the platformisation process

Of the production logics detailed by Kerr (2017), of special interest for this dissertation is the platform logic, and how it has infiltrated the wider media industry to such an evident degree. As Kerr states, platform logic has fast become the generic logic of the global game industry. It relies "on the continuous, dynamic and almost real-time flow of data between users, intermediaries, content creators and other parties to support both indirect and direct forms of monetisation and customisation" (Kerr 2017, 69). Here, the emphasis is on the new combination of firstly the indirect forms of commodification, and secondly the direct, now almost real-time usage of them. The majority of the most visible new actors in the digital games industry have constructed their business resting on digital distribution (in contrast to the traditional actors who still need to cater to their legacy audiences in physical retail). The digital distribution of games has in turn been strongly concentrated and platformised since its inception. This development has only got stronger in time, increasing the vertical concentration and hegemonic dominance of the largest transnational conglomerates.

The process of the platformisation of the techno-cultural landscape has been examined in notable studies (e.g. Srnicek 2017; Gillespie 2010, 2017). In the political economies of new media and digital games, the platformisation of cultural production has also been highlighted. David Nieborg and Thomas Poell (2018) argue that the more large-scale platformisation evident in contemporary culture (in the western countries this means mostly Google, Apple, Facebook, Amazon and Microsoft) has had numerous effects that shape both how cultural production is organized and controlled, and the cultural product itself, i.e. how games and news are turned into contingent items precariously dependent on their platforms (Nieborg & Poell 2018; see also Gillespie 2010). In their examination of the platformisation of cultural production, Nieborg and Poell concentrate on the games and news industries. They advocate combining research approaches drawn from business studies, political economy of media, and software studies. These three approaches correspond to three areas of the platformisation process that Nieborg and Poell hold key to the current landscape. First, in this platform economy, markets turn from two-sided markets (i.e. the ideal of digital distribution that cuts out all other intermediaries besides the developer and the customer) to become multisided markets with the producers and intermediaries being subjected to the political economy associated with multi-sided markets. Second, the platformisation process affects and shapes the flow of power and money within and around the affected system in a way that warrants critical attention. Third, platforms transform the infrastructure of the associated cultural production in various ways, including the need to structure the cultural production according to the underlying and emerging demands of the system (Nieborg & Poell 2018). According to Nieborg and Poell, political economy helps draw:

> "attention to the ongoing commodification of content, the exploitation of cultural labour, and the (immaterial) labour of users […]. Along similar lines, critical scholars have been pointing toward the ongoing trend of corporate concentration. […] [T]hey have been at the forefront of documenting corporate growth, ownership concentration, and institutional and corporate integration in the cultural industries. […] Political economic research helps us to critically consider how platformisation affects media plurality, the independence of cultural producers, access to media, and the influence of owners.

This dissertation adopts platformisation of cultural production as a research lens toward games crowdfunding because, as a concept, it offers a particularly useful and systematic approach for exploring contemporary cultural production and the transformation taking place in it (Duffy et al. 2019). However, each case of

platformisation exhibits unique characteristics. One focus area of platformisation research has been social media platforms, with special attention paid to how such platforms shape cultural production. Compared to social media platforms, crowdfunding represents a somewhat different kind of platformisation of cultural production, albeit one that is more direct in some ways. The role of the users/audience within crowdfunding is also rather unique (an area that was relatively untouched by Nieborg and Poell's (2018) original analysis). In the discussion section of the thesis, I will elaborate further how games crowdfunding represents a unique example of platformisation of cultural production and, in parts, expands on previous studies concentrated on the topic.

Participative audiences and new forms of consumption

In addition to the political economy perspective, this dissertation assumes a cultural studies perspective to account for the crucial part of the backer community in crowdfunding. As explained in Chapter 3.1, the contemporary forms of crowdsourcing and crowdfunding have their roots in the Web 2.0, participatory and convergence cultures of the early 2000s which circled around platforms such as YouTube, Flickr and MySpace (Jenkins, 1992, 2006). Moving on roughly 20 years to the present day, participatory cultures have become highly commercialised due to the platformisation process described above, including how global platform conglomerates like Google, Apple and Facebook are able to harness data from all areas of human life and use it in ways that make it commercially viable. Nieborg and Poell (2018) remind that a "networked information economy" (Benkler 2006) was supposed to reverse the dominance of the industrial mode of production. However, although user-driven culture is thriving, the platformisation process represents "a centralized, proprietary mode of cultural production", and in fact advances "the project of control" (Benkler 2006) and its central elements, commercialization and corporate concentration (ibid. p.32).

While these processes warrant critical examination, some media scholars such as Eileen Meehan (2000) and Douglas Kellner (2009) have argued for an approach that combines political economy with audience studies, in order to balance both optimism and pessimism on both sides. Here, the political economy approach serves to detail the rigid structures formed by the hegemonic cultural industries, while studying audiences helps us understand the free-form, sometimes even anarchic movement within and around those structures.

Both the optimistic and the cynical approaches on the position of fans have been well represented in the current scholarship. Along with Jenkins (2006, 1992), scholars such as Olli Sotamaa (2009) have concentrated on the position of fans and active audiences, countering some of the bleaker viewpoints of fan exploitation. On the other hand, Fast et al. (2016) highlight the various forms that free labour within media industries now takes, and how these labourers – such as fans – and their work are often in a very precarious position. In his 2013 book about the co-creative practices between game players and game developers, John Banks brought a much needed understanding to the position of fans whose productive practices add value to the game production network. Banks and Humphreys (2008) argue that this kind of value-adding labour by user co-creators forms new kinds of "hybrid relations that cut across the commercial and non-commercial social networks and markets", and that while "messy", these "new formations hold a wide range of benefits and value." Elsewhere, current scholarship has examined the blurring boundaries between production and consumption through various concepts such as 'prosumer' (Toffler 1980; Ritzer & Jurgenson 2010), 'produser' (Bruns 2008) and 'playbour' (Kücklich 2005). Kline et al. (2003) discussed the widening roles of users through their 'three circuits model', where users were identified also as players and consumers. Such scholarship points to the ongoing and perpetual changes in how academia and users define themselves and their position.

In examining the scope and depth of industry power, crowdfunding offers a new and important front where the boundaries between producers and consumers are being contested, sometimes in a way that leaves it relatively unclear whether fans feel exploited by the developers or underlying system. Scholarship has highlighted that we need to pay crucial attention to the "dynamic push-pull of industry and player" (Consalvo 2007, 2), i.e. to address as best as we can how both parties are constantly being shaped by the other. The role of the backer-audience and their motivations to participate is central in the context of crowdfunding, often at the same time as players, consumers and users. From the emergence of the phenomenon, crowdfunding has been examined by research (mostly business studies) from the perspective of why people take part in it. In the results chapter 4.2., I round out, widen and deepen the role and place of the user-backer within the larger crowdfunding ecosystem.

3.3.2 Cultural studies on crowdfunding

In research focused on cultural studies and cultural industry aspects, crowdfunding has received moderate interest. Hills (2015) looks at 'fanancing' and the 'affective economics' in film crowdfunding, while Scott (2015) examines the moral economy of crowdfunding and debates the limits of fanancing with film and comic books. Farnel (2015) explores the crowdfunding of gender reassignment surgeries. Stiver et al. (2015) illustrate the landscape of 'civic crowdfunding' and its possibilities. Koçer (2015) describes independent documentary film practices in Turkey. Both Carvajal et al. (2012) and Hunter (2015) explore how crowdfunding affects freelance and independent journalism. Lastly, studying project creators, Davidson and Poor (2015) argue that running crowdfunding projects might require a specific set of character traits such as being an extrovert.

In the context of the games industry, crowdfunding has been specifically researched in a few highlighted studies. In cultural studies, Smith (2015) examines the effects of the back-forth relationship between backers and creator-developers, concluding that while developers are more directly able decide what kind of a game the game developer wants to develop, backers have, at least in some cases, significant power to influence the game development process, for example making sure games are made more inclusive. As a counter example, Lolli (2018) analyses the crowdfunding success of *Shenmue III* (Ys Net 2019) as a case example of the political economy of games crowdfunding, questioning the empowering potential of the model in the face of big business co-optation. Examining game industry conditions for independent game development, Vanderhoef (2016) dedicates a fair amount of space to seeing crowdfunding as a phenomenon that has had a clear impact within that industry sector. Like Lolli, he is suspicious towards the democratizing and/or emancipatory potential of the model, and sees it attuning to the overarching neoliberalist logic that governs the AAA-game industry. Vanderhoef asserts that "in the process of gaining independence from the major publishers, indie studios have developed a dependence on other companies and groups, including venture-backed crowdfunding services, their escrow partners, and scrutinizing fans" (ibid. 146). I continue these lines of research, further elaborating such thematics in the discussion and conclusions.

Jon Swords (2017) examines the plural roles of intermediaries in the crowdfunding networks. Writing about the crowd-patronage platform Patreon, Swords (2017) points out how getting rid of the numerous intermediaries, i.e. the process of 'disintermediation', was one of the founding reasons to set up a service

like Patreon. However, Swords argues that "the role played by intermediaries is so embedded into production networks rather than processes of disintermediation, we instead see re-intermediation", not least by the crowdfunding platforms themselves (2017). Platforms practice curating and gatekeeping, first, through human-coded algorithms that suggest content that the user might like and, second, by excluding for example content that the platform deems too risqué (e.g. adult-oriented) from suggestions (Swords 2017).

Kerr (2017) also talks about crowdfunding as an alternative form of financing. She draws attention to the fact that projects must "communicate with and mediate the demands of a large number of potentially conflicting voices during production. It places a new set of demands on the project and reshapes the development company/ player/ funder relationship." She reminds that projects can gather funding from various places to supplement their financing, e.g. by selling access to an early prototype through services like Steam Early Access. Kerr also argues that through using crowdfunding platforms, game developers assume more of the risk previously handled by publishers, and that funder-players step into the production process at quite an early stage. "Production is thus becoming more distributed and networked beyond the core development firm and a greater number of actors have a say in production." (Kerr 2017, 87-88)

Finally, within consumer research, Planells (2017) explores games crowdfunding in terms of the transformation of the player into a 'prosumer' (Toffler 1980; Ritzer & Jurgenson 2010) and an investor. Furthermore, he draws attention to the discourse surrounding the crowdfunding model and how that discourse frames publishers, user-backers and the developed content. Working from a critical Marxist viewpoint, he identifies an "emancipatory-utopian framework" surrounding the games crowdfunding environment, pointing that it is a rhetoric that is critical of the traditional game publishers and almost revolutionary sounding in terms of the future of game development.

I have now gone over cultural studies and political economy of the media research, and the game studies that integrate these disciplinary perspectives, as well as a few key studies on cultural aspects of crowdfunding, both in games and elsewhere. As the title of this chapter is 'In search of games crowdfunding research', Figure 7 showcases the background research of the thesis as thematic key words, illustrating the landscape of games crowdfunding research. Games crowdfunding research is located at the cross section of games studies, political economy of the media and cultural studies, and draws from each area.

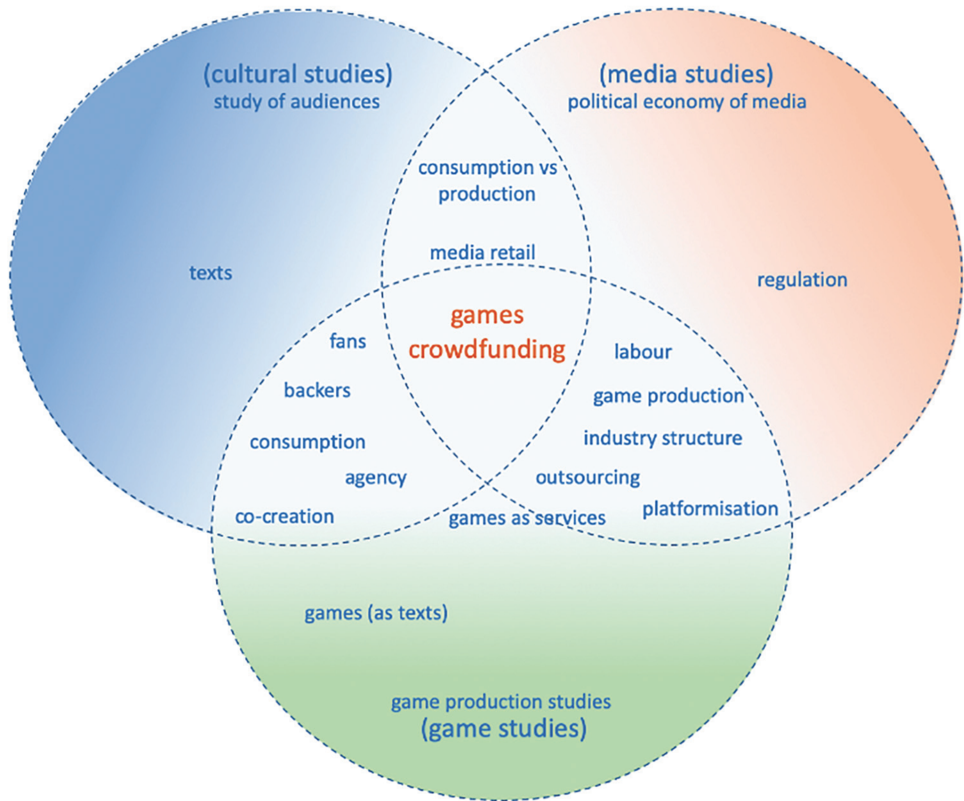

Figure 7. Games crowdfunding in disciplinary context

However, there is yet another disciplinary area – that of business studies – that can contribute to the theory and concepts required to understand the inner workings of games crowdfunding. Crowdfunding has predominantly been researched in business studies. In the final section of this background research chapter, I go over some of the studies in that area of research. Drawing from the cultural studies tradition of incorporating what is needed to understand the target of the study on a case-by-case basis (Nelson et al. 1992), I try to find some common threads to my overall research and incorporate them into the areas of games crowdfunding and game production.

3.3.3 Business studies on crowdfunding

Critically evaluating the political economy of digital games involves examining phenomena such as the value chain and value formation within the games industry.

As such phenomena deal with the financial, entrepreneurial and managerial aspects of digital game production, it is only natural that business studies (referred to here in a broad sense) have focused on some of these aspects during the growth of the industry. From a cultural studies point of view, business studies typically do not adopt any kind of critical stance towards the game industry. However, business studies sometimes offer a scholar of the political economy of the media an increased understanding of the various business logics employed within cultural industries, which in turn might help critique such logics. Thus, in this sub-chapter I try to broaden the disciplinary approach of this dissertation to include some business studies insights that might better help readers understand the results presented in the next chapter.

As a general notion, it could be said that business studies centred around digital game production are most interested in 1) the creators as entrepreneurs, and 2) the possibilities of crowdfunding in a business development sense. On the other hand, cultural and media studies are interested in the backers', their opinions and the associated culture, and creator cultures, for example working conditions and the organisation of work. Cultural and media studies benefit from reviewing business studies literature, at least as a way of understanding the draw of crowdfunding for small and mid-sized entrepreneurs, and some of the initial reasons for game developers to choose crowdfunding. Business studies would, on the other hand, benefit from reviewing cultural and media studies on crowdfunding to better understand the nuances of networked markets, i.e. the individual cultures of backer behaviour.

In their examination on the platformisation of cultural production, Nieborg and Poell (2018) describe how business studies complement the more critical political economy analysis. For them, business studies mainly "focus on for-profit companies operating as intermediaries in platform markets" and "adopt a transactional perspective to analyze the relationships among platform holders and between platform holders […], users [and] complementors". Problematically though, business studies "tend to treat platforms as relatively static objects", when in fact they are in constant flux. Furthermore, within business studies there is a shortage of scholarly analysis of the multi-faceted relationship between platforms and the complementors working on and around them, as well as the motivations of complementors, the strategies they develop, and how platforms regulate these strategies. In combining business studies with political economy, they stress the importance of multi-sided market theory and the concentration of power that

follows from this, i.e. how "platform ownership incentivizes platform holders to promote certain sides over others" (Nieborg & Poell 2018).

Taking a closer look at the business studies research on crowdfunding, they generally concentrate on entrepreneurial strategies, motivations for participation, consumption, and market formations. Numerous studies look at the possible factors behind campaign success (e.g. Mollick 2014; Allison et al. 2015; Ahlers et al. 2015; Lagazio & Querci 2018). Among the highlighted results are that the number of creator comments, the length of their replies, and the reply speed are positively associated with the success of the campaign (Wang et al. 2018; Mollick 2014). The benefits of using crowdfunding have also gained a fair amount of interest. These include, among others, having greater control over IP, marketing and distribution channels (Nucciarelli et al. 2017), price discrimination (i.e. selling the same product at different price points to different customers: Belleflamme et al. 2014; Nieborg & Poell 2018), harnessing social networks and therefore direct and indirect network effects for marketing and selling the game (Nucciarelli et al. 2017; cf. Schwienbacher & Larralde 2010), and creating or connecting to a community of potential customers (Gerber & Hui 2013). Of note is that all of these features and/or affordances could be considered to incentivise game developers to use the model. Other areas of interest for business studies include the effects of location (Agrawal et al. 2015), determinants of backing behaviour (Bi et al. 2017; Burtch et al. 2014; Cholakova & Clarysse 2015; Gerber & Hui 2013; Boyaval & Herbert 2018), and campaign creator motivations (Belleflamme et al. 2014; Gerber & Hui 2013). In an interview study examining reasons for backer participation, Gerber and Hui (2013) found out that backers participate to acquire rewards, to help others, contribute to causes, and to participate in a community, and the main reason not to participate was a lack of trust in the project creator. Hui, Gerber and Greenberg (2012) found that crowdfunding work requires more skill and time than initially expected by the project creators, particularly in preparing the materials and marketing associated with the campaign.

In terms of business studies focused on games crowdfunding, Cha (2017) examined the factors that influence the success and capital pledged for campaigns, finding that displaying previous creator experience has the most crucial role. This study supports the notion that games crowdfunding sustains known creators, and therefore might uphold the systemic power of those who are already privileged. Adding to previous studies that have highlighted the importance of the campaign video (e.g. Mollick 2014), Cha (2017) also found that campaign sites that use a lot of graphics, videos, and images tend to fare better. This finding is significant in stressing the importance of the campaign preparation work, including the pre-production of

graphic assets. Nucciarelli et al. (2017) concentrated on the value networks of crowdfunding and articulated how digital games crowdfunding creators might benefit from reward-based crowdfunding, highlighting four specific effects. First, successful funding might make it easier to get further investments from traditional sources. Second, game developers tend to develop primarily for PC, due to less regulation by platform holders. Third, the model allows developers to gather more market knowledge via the backer-developer connection "for timely and more successful release". Finally, the model allows developers to get a quick market response.

However, considering the number of research articles on games crowdfunding, still more research is needed, even if one adopts a cross-disciplinary perspective and considers both cultural research and business studies. This becomes even more pressing due to the phenomenon of games crowdfunding not being restricted to Kickstarter.

Chapter conclusions

This chapter has gone through the research literature related to this dissertation and the relevant work framing the analysis presented in the following results chapter. The key foci of the dissertation included elaborating concepts of crowdfunding, the traditional game industry and the more recently emerged industry of independent game production. In theorizing the background for the study, the relationship between cultural studies, game studies and game production studies was first discussed, after which the emerging area of game production studies was elaborated. Here, one of the main points was to go over studies that critically examined the traditional game industry and its political economy. The discussion also went over key studies to have similarly examined the contemporary, emerging forms of independent game production, and how these have offered alternative modes of game work next to the hegemonic AAA industry. Aphra Kerr's model of production logics was highlighted as one of the better models to capture the evolving and emerging forms of game industry production, including game crowdfunding. The dominant logic of today's game industry is the platform logic; this was examined by expanding the intricacies of platformised forms of cultural production. Finally, the cultural studies tradition of researching audiences was brought in together with the political economy perspective to highlight the importance of the backer community in the context of evolving game industry forms centred on grass-roots interaction, such as that which occurs in crowdfunding.

Moving on from game production studies, a few important cultural studies on crowdfunding were emphasised, including the research of Swords (2017) who highlighted the emergence of the new cultural intermediaries within the crowdfunding system, and Smith (2015) who examined the crucial backer-developer connection in game crowdfunding. Finally, I elaborated on a few important business studies on crowdfunding to broaden the background research presented in this dissertation. Business studies have highlighted many of the factors that would draw entrepreneurs such as game developers towards using the model, illustrating the different kinds of starting points cultural creators face when entering the model. These business studies help game production scholars, political economists and cultural studies researchers to pay attention to important areas of interest in crowdfunding, and elaborate them in a more cultural and media studies-oriented ways. Figure 8 showcases games crowdfunding in this updated disciplinary context.

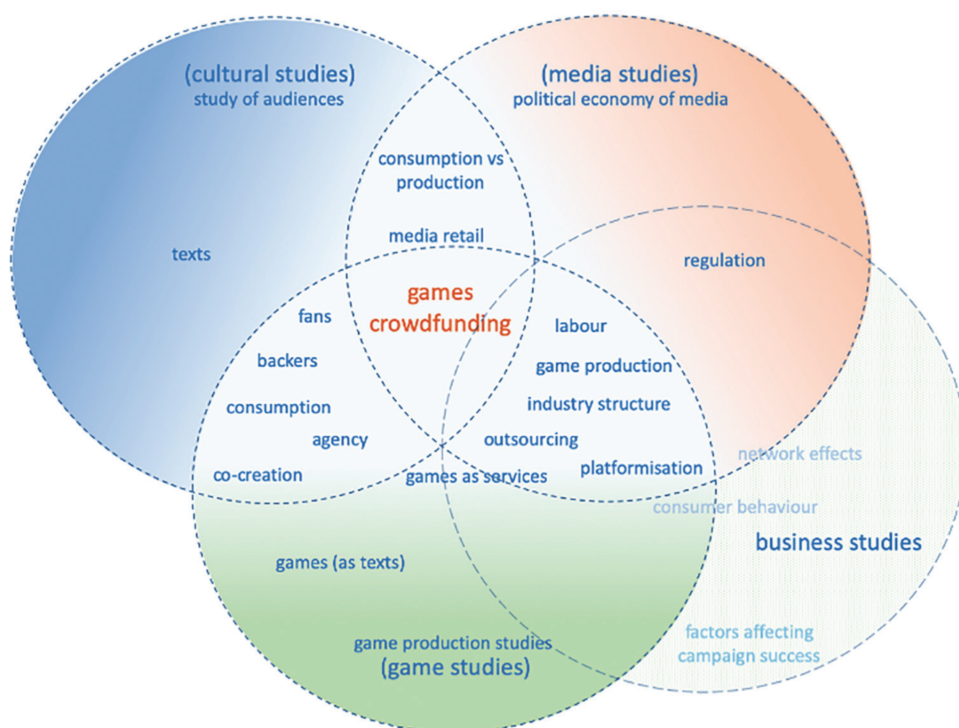

Figure 8. Disciplinary-thematic landscape of games crowdfunding research

Engaging game production studies as the main lens in studying crowdfunding helps connect the study with wider research traditions concentrated on the issues of

networked cultural production, finding parallels with the music and film industries. At the same time, this approach helps connect the field of game production studies with the wider field of production studies. I next move on to the results chapter of the thesis, detailing how this dissertation complements and furthers the existing research presented in this chapter. Especially the scarce literature on crowdfunding is expanded through the results: studies discussing the crowdfunding production environment in terms of network intermediaries are expanded (cf. Swords 2017), games crowdfunding is identified as an entire production logic that affects all areas of game work, the multiple roles of the backers are explored and conceptualised (cf. Smith 2015), and the connection between game retail and crowdfunding is cross-examined as a helpful new area of research that highlights future trends in both areas. The results are then further advanced and fleshed out in the discussion and conclusions sections of the dissertation through connecting the concept of platformisation of cultural production into the research strand.

4 SUMMARY OF RESULTS

In this results chapter, the analyses presented in the four research articles are explained in a condensed form. The results are divided into three chapters dedicated to the topics of games crowdfunding production, the reception of the model by the backer-audience, and the implications of the crowdfunding model for traditional game retail and how the model reflects the changing landscape of media consumption. Thus, each sub-chapter corresponds with one of the sub-questions of the dissertation. While these summaries do not present any new research beyond that which has already been presented in the appended articles, some of the results in these sub-chapters have been slightly re-evaluated due to the benefit of hindsight. In such cases, my more recent thoughts are made clear next to the ideas presented in the articles. Drawing the examination to a close, in the final chapter of the dissertation, Chapter 5, some further implications of these results are discussed, the conclusions of each chapter are synthesised, and the main research question is answered.

4.1 Crowdfunding shapes game work

In this first results chapter, I examine games crowdfunding from the perspective of production. I argue that for the developers, crowdfunding is not just a funding mechanism, but much more than that: it affects all facets of the production environment including pre-production, marketing, the service platform, business partners, development, community management, release, retail, and post-release services. I argue that crowdfunding constitutes a 'production logic' of its own, following the conceptualization by Kerr (2017) (discussed in Chapter 3). Kerr argued that emerging production models can be explained with the logics she identifies, or at least by their combination. Accordingly, this chapter examines the crowdfunding model as an emerging production logic that shares attributes with existing logics, namely the publishing and platform logics.

In the course of this chapter I will, first examine what it means to move from the traditional game production logic (the publishing logic) into the crowdfunding

model. Problematizing the emancipatory rhetoric attached to the democratising potential of crowdfunding, I highlight how games crowdfunding entails a lot of work as a result of getting rid of the traditional game publishers. I critically evaluate the precarity of game crowdfunding work, and argue that in entering the emerging network markets based on digital platforms, game developers are forced to do a lot of 'relational labour' (Baym 2018). As a second point, I examine the production network involved with game production through crowdfunding, and conclude that in taking care of the tasks previously handled by the publishers, developers need to settle into a new kind of production ecosystem while forming new connections with emerging industry intermediaries. At the end of the chapter, I point out the similarities and differences between the crowdfunding production logic and the existing production logics.

Games crowdfunding is a lot of work

For the game developer, the promise of engaging in crowdfunding is first and foremost in getting rid of the publisher as a value chain governor (cf. Nieborg 2011). This, in itself, has framed crowdfunding as an appealing target for game developers. Digital storefronts such as Steam allow developers to distribute their own games, with the platform holder taking a fixed percentage of the sales price. However, in the absence of a publisher, this kind of distribution-only deal leaves the developer with a problem: where to secure funding to develop the game? Here, crowdfunding has provided independent developers with a logical solution, and by showing their development plans directly to the interested audience, developers are potentially able to collect micro-funding from them. In turn, successfully raising funding from the crowd makes a financing loan unnecessary (see Figure 9). On the other hand, if the funding campaign is not successful, crowdfunding ideally allows the developer to fail quickly (Mollick 2014), i.e. to get a quick market response with no need to incur further expenses (Nucciarelli et al. 2017). Especially in the early days of Kickstarted game campaign successes, the rhetoric surrounding the crowdfunding model made crowdfunding seem like a quick and easy affair that every game developer would benefit from (Planells 2017).

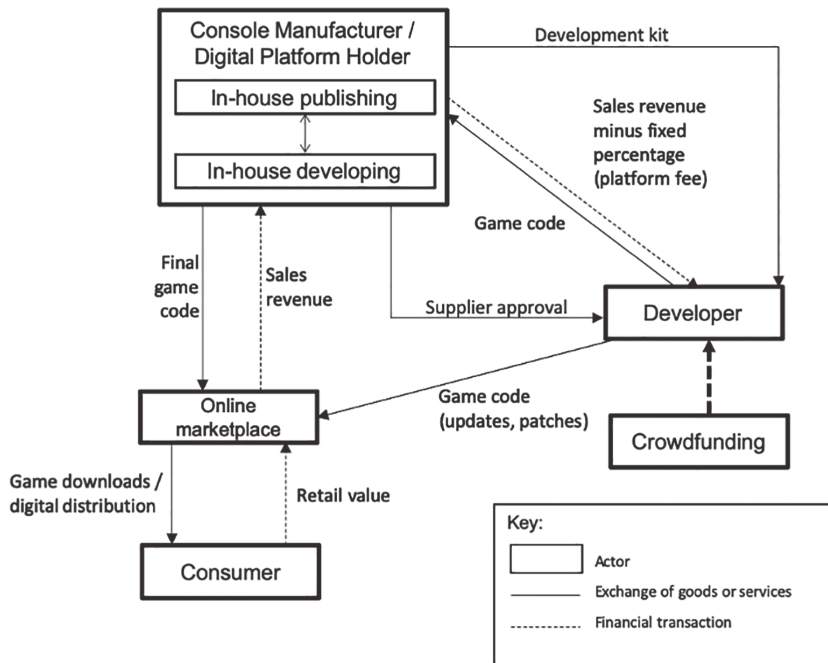

Figure 9. Streamlined production network with crowdfunding

However, my examination of the case example games of *Bloodstained: Ritual of the Night* (ArtPlay 2019) and *Conan* (Monolith 2016) revealed that the mundane reality of the model is more laborious than assumed, with several factors causing uncertainty and increased risk. The first issue is the increased workload on the developer. Both example campaigns needed to do a lot of pre-campaign preparation work. Already prior to its crowdfunding campaign phase, *Conan* was designed to a highly polished state and had been tested in numerous game conventions. As a project, *Bloodstained* had gone through a lot of design and pre-production work and the project leads had set up a large organization already prior to the campaign phase. The game was described as a "collaboration between dozens of people across a variety of companies", with the campaign site introducing key people, guest artists, and different "departments" such as 'PR', 'Partner sourcing' and 'Development'. Marketing efforts were started half a year in advance of the actual campaign, and contractors outside the studio for example designed and prepared a large number of

physical rewards for the campaign and created assets like a promotional website and a high-quality pitch video.

During the *Bloodstained* campaign, major social media channels including YouTube, Facebook, Twitter, Tumblr, Instagram, Twitch and Vine were all used to promote the game. Besides backer updates, creator communication took place via Facebook, Twitter, weekly "Ask IGA" YouTube videos, and other channels. Project lead Igarashi and his agent Ben Judd gave interviews to gaming sites, toured several gaming shows and created podcasts to market the game, and Igarashi gave a live "ask me anything" session on Reddit. The mid-campaign marketing utilised gamification in the form of various carefully designed community achievements. The *Conan* project organised cross-promotional collaborations with other *Conan* themed games, the MMORPG *Age of Conan* (Funcom 2012) and the tabletop roleplaying game *Robert E. Howard's Conan* (Modiphius 2016), and another tabletop game, *Blood Rage* (CoolMiniOrNot 2015).

Along with marketing, customer service might have been the most laborious task in the process. In both projects, community managers spent a very long time with the player community in anticipation of the release of the game (years, in the case of *Bloodstained*), juggling multiple tasks such as acting as the first line of post-campaign marketing and managing backer expectations. Effectively, developers who use crowdfunding need to keep their fan communities 'entertained' for years, corresponding with the observations made by Baym (2015; 2018). In both projects, the project leads appeared regularly in updates to tell how the production was advancing. In the case of *Bloodstained*, this also meant several updates where Igarashi apologised to the backer community for delays. These updates also had to be delivered on time, every month. Additionally, both campaigns needed to handle customer service issues in terms of informing, pledge management, cancellations, answering questions, and reward fulfilment. With *Bloodstained*, many of these were taken care of by Fangamer, but later on a publisher (505 Games) was brought in and started to share some of the tasks with them. Managing tens of thousands of backer pledges is yet another huge logistical challenge for large crowdfunding projects, and both projects ended up using external pledge management services.

In terms of development work, both projects grew in size so much during the campaign phase that coming up with new stretch goals and organising their production resulted in a lot of extra work for the projects. Both projects needed to start hiring additional creators and sub-contractors. Both projects needed to put work into managing backer response in terms of the associated reputations of the sub-contractor studios (Inti Creates for example was sub-contracted previously to

develop the much-maligned, high-profile Kickstarter project *Mighty No. 9* [Comcept/Inti Creates 2016]) or even the lack of reputation (Monobit and Dico were unknown entities who were entrusted at the time with an unnerving amount of development responsibility in the eyes of the backers), and also for ending the relationships with sub-contractors and starting new ones (for example letting Inti Creates go and replacing it with Dico and Monobit). Even contracting a seasoned studio (WayForward) to help polish the game in a late stage was met with dismay as some vocal backers felt that it was a sign of a game being in a rough state at such a late phase of development. After multiple delays, *Bloodstained* launched in 2019, and the work that needed to be done to patch the different launch versions of the game seemed substantial. The team needed to put many months of extra work into fixing bugs and other issues. Even after a year, in 2020, the team was still working on missing stretch goal content. (For a more detailed breakdown on the division of work associated with the case example projects, see Article I.)

Emerging industry intermediaries

As described in the case studies, both developers needed to distribute many of the additional tasks to subcontractors, as the workload amounted to become too much of a burden. Most of the subcontractors associated with the model emerged after the rise of crowdfunding platforms, and many have specialized to provide services in the crowdfunding ecosystem. In addition to the intermediaries identified within the *Bloodstained* and *Conan* campaigns, there are an increasing number of such intermediary services. When all of these intermediaries are considered in the context of the streamlined production network model, the model starts to look decidedly less streamlined (see Figures 10 and 11, built on the case examples and complemented with other, emerging services). It becomes clear that the crowdfunding model has spawned a production network of its own around game development, and that it can be quite a crowded mesh of actors. While it was only the publisher that the developer needed to communicate with in the traditional model, and only the platform holder in the idealised distribution-only model, there are in fact several companies dedicated to different aspects of marketing and customer relations. The *Bloodstained* project included seven different companies dedicated to development alone in different stages (ArtPlay, Inti Creates, Dico, Monobit, Armature, Rocket Sound and WayForward), often involving several at the same time. Meanwhile, the *Conan* team delegated "bug hunting" and content creation

to the backer community, and subsequent marketing rested partly on the premise that there would be a hub of possibly hundreds of player-created play scenarios.

At the centre of all the network actors, the crowdfunding platform emerges as a "neutral" central broker – comparable to a social network platform –, which nevertheless dictates the rules, sets the marketing stage, and has significant control over visibility (cf. Gillespie 2010). Kickstarter has its own internal logic for endorsing projects (marking it with a "Project We Love" sign) and highlighting them both on their frontpage and in their "Games You Can Play Right Now!" section. This is one of the key instances where a supposedly neutral and democratic platform exercises very factual selection and gatekeeping in terms of the content it hosts (cf. Gillespie 2017; Swords 2017).

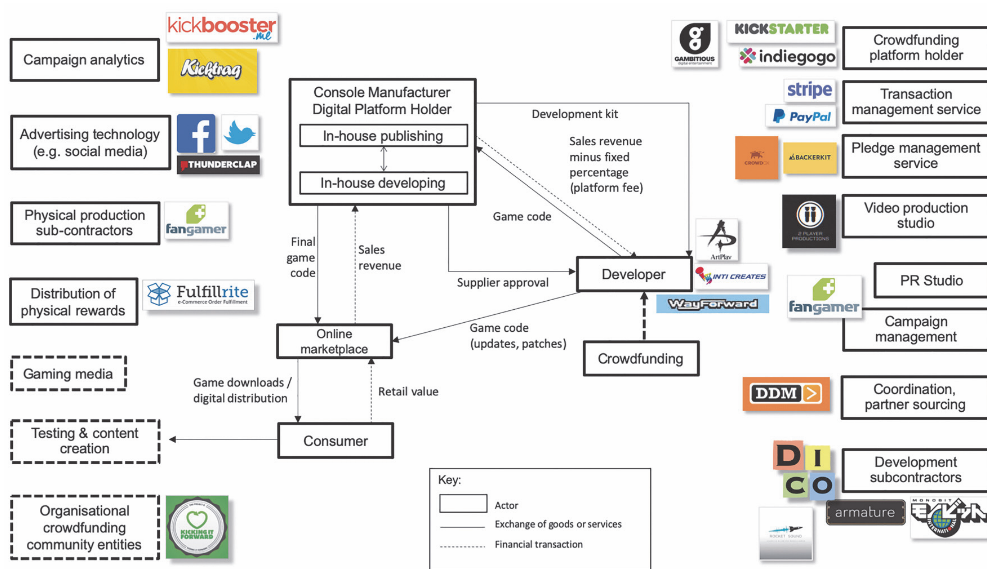

Figure 10. Crowdfunding production network with emerging intermediaries

Bloodstained (which gathered a record crowdfunding budget for the time) clearly had more production entities than an average sized project, and therefore the organisation had to be run in a more producer-like capacity. At the same time, Igarashi needed to develop the game in a very hands-on capacity, leaving no extra time to assume the role that an actual publisher would have played. In the end, the *Bloodstained* project made a publishing deal with a mid-sized publisher (505 Games) which then tackled many of these tasks to deal with the bloated organisation. On the other hand, even if we examine a much smaller project, this bloated work

organisation reflects the situation of many smaller developers utilising crowdfunding. At the very least, the developer needs to prepare and run the campaign, develop the game, keep track of all the pledges (and any possible changes), and fulfil the promised rewards. On top of this, many game creators are engaging this process either alone or in groups of two or three people who are scattered in different cities, perhaps even different countries. All of this entails a lot of stress, as the developer juggles all of these tasks.

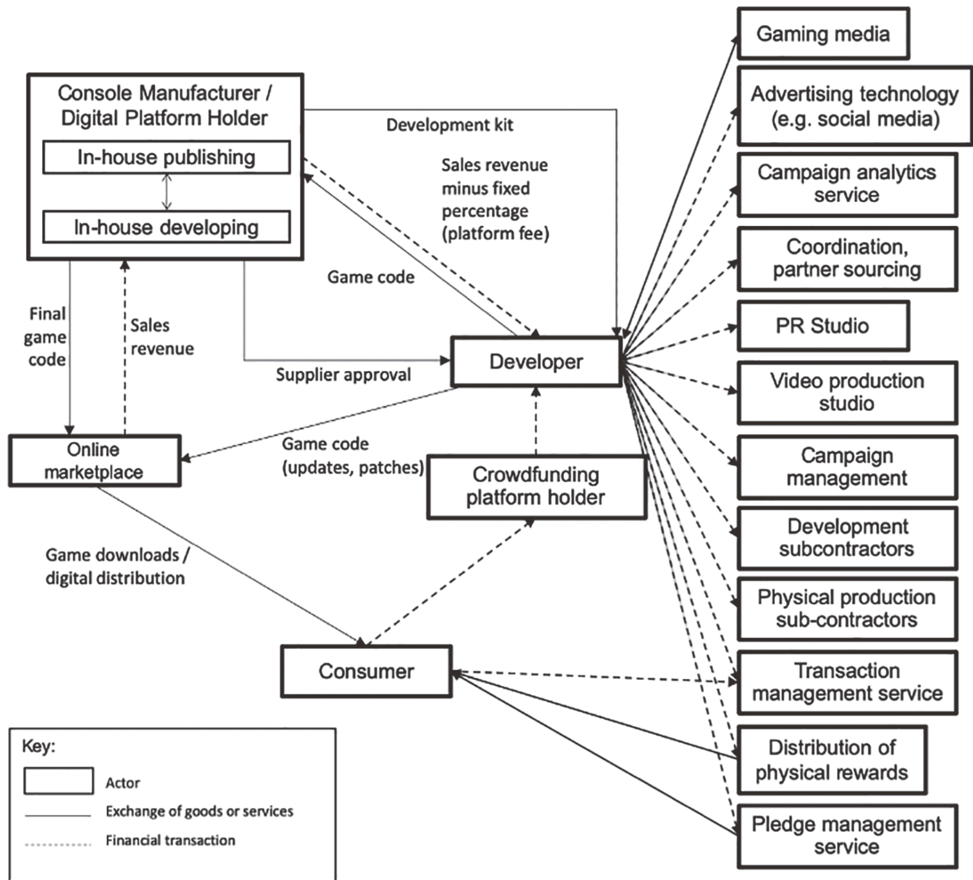

Figure 11. Example production network in the crowdfunding model

Another instance is the backer audience, which as the case examples show, plays a more multifaceted part than the audience in the traditional industry production model. Instead of being "just" an audience, backers also acted as funders, customers, co-creators, marketers, and more (expanded in Chapter 4.2 and 4.3). Many of the

industry intermediaries we can now identify within the crowdfunding environment – both old and newly emerged – are there because of the backers, whether due to the size or nature of the audience. Pledge management services, reward fulfilment services and community managers are all there to communicate different things to the backers at various points of the process: to inform and explain, manage expectations, manage payments and address changes, and to keep up the excitement with updates in several different channels. Even in the AAA-space, the game industry has moved away from the traditional 'fire-and-forget' model where the game was announced and then launched, typically in a quite complete stage. Now games are announced, alpha- and beta-tested, released, patched, and updated with new gaming content. All of this means that continuous communication is much more important than it used to be, and within the crowdfunding model this is exceedingly amplified because of several uncertainty factors. The *Bloodstained* project, for example, encountered delays, platform changes and unexpected quality disparities between different platforms, necessitating a lot of long-term damage control within the backer community, both to keep the backers content and to prevent a negative publicity impact on the actual launch of the game. In both the *Conan* and *Bloodstained* projects, community managers held an extremely important and busy role (for the reasons mentioned above), pointing to the increasing importance of formerly insignificant gamework professions such as community managers in the gaming industry (Kerr & Kelleher 2015).

Instead of being just a funding mechanism to finance game creation, games crowdfunding constitutes an entire production logic that affects the game production process in multiple overarching ways. Looking at the production networks of the example games, we can see that in wanting to remove the publisher from the network, the developers need to shoulder many new responsibilities previously associated with the publisher, including marketing, partner sourcing, distribution networks and customer relationships. O'Donnell (2014) describes how shifting requirements in the game industry have necessitated re-organising the production structure through creating new industry professions. Instead of getting rid of the roles formerly associated with the publisher, the roles were in fact redistributed (in some cases in fragmented form) to existing and new parties in the production network. At the same time, many new tasks and requirements have emerged. The need for marketing has risen continuously, and evidence from the example cases suggests that independent game development projects become increasingly frontloaded with preparation work. Much of this work falls outside of the traditional core competency of game developers. Due to the large number of

intermediaries that projects might end up needing to use, entering the crowdfunding model to secure a better contract in terms of revenue percentage will not necessarily work, and instead of disintermediation, we get re-intermediation (Swords 2017).

When we turn to the concept of production logics and place the crowdfunding model next to its closest comparison points of classic publishing and flow logics (see Table 2), we can see that it is mainly a combination of classic publishing logic mixed with the more modern tendencies of platform logic. The unusually strong top-heaviness of the productions illustrates some of the more general tendencies of current game production, i.e. a strong emphasis on marketing and what it demands. However, there are also characteristics that are separate from the existing logics, mainly highlighting the role of customers/backers as central brokers who must be negotiated with, at the very least in the campaign phase.

Table 2. Example logics of cultural production in the game industry compared with the crowdfunding model (Kerr 2017; adapted)

Characteristics	*Publishing logic*	*Platform logic*	*Crowdfunding logic*
General	One-off cultural commodities, impulse purchases	Continuous flow of user data, prof. and amateur created content, content personalisation and adaptation	Pre-publication grass-roots marketing, a semi-live service and semi-continuous flow of content during campaign, one-off cultural commodities, impulse purchases, collecting funding before the product has been created, maintaining regular updates or service after the campaign
Central broker(s)	Publishers, platforms/publishers	Platform intermediaries/ developers/publishers	Platforms, intermediaries, developers, backers
Economic chain / network	Project by project basis, irregular work, royalties and copyright	Project by project basis, Programmers, engineers, data analysts, customer relations and support; Wage and freelance labour but also amateurs	Project by project basis, Freelance and amateur labour; Customer relations; Reward logistics

Creative professions	Authors, composers, directors, artists and specialised technicians	Designers, artists, engineers, network support, marketing, data analysts, community managers, game designers, players	Designers, programmers, artists, marketing, community managers, players
Sales & revenue	Direct; Product by product; Premium	Indirect – freemium, advertising, data. Some direct – DLC, micro transactions	Direct – Pre-launch sales, product by product, in tiered options. Product to be delivered later. Major part of profit from post-launch sales
Market characteristics	Segmented mass market, catalogue	Niche, fragmented, personalised	Niche market, some segmentation and personalisation

4.2 Backing is about more than just funding

So far, I have discussed the crowdfunding production environment and logic from a political economy point of view. I now turn to look at the crowdfunding backers. In the course of this chapter, I will go over two things. First, bridging the analysis from the previous chapter that examined the production networks within game crowdfunding, I will look at the labour of backers, i.e. what kind of work backers do in the crowdfunding model. After this, I will turn to examine various other motivations for backer participation. This section reports the findings published in Articles 2 and 3. The highlighted key observations concentrate on topics that are relevant both to the issues presented in this chapter and to the argumentation presented in the other two findings chapters. These include backer attitudes and motivations concerning the political economy of the crowdfunding model, including helping small creators, giving creators autonomy and downplaying the influence of AAA publishing; creators and development (for example the value of crowdfunding as a channel to follow development); views concerning retail, i.e. the centrality of the game product and the subsequent conflict between the two stances of crowdfunding as buying a product versus crowdfunding as helping others in a more altruistic manner.

Backer labour: A complex asset

In addition to providing funding to campaigns, backers end up doing many other tasks that typically benefit the campaign. The case example of *Bloodstained* highlights how marketing and other processes were delegated to funders in unobtrusive ways. Here, social media was used to a great extent to launch viral campaigns on multiple occasions. First, the campaign success was 'gamified' by creating special backer community 'achievements' (cf. Hamari 2017). The community could, for example, earn achievements when different social media channels achieved a certain number of followers and when enough fan art was posted online. A set number of achievements would then yield bonuses related to *Bloodstained*, such as game art wallpapers and reveals of upcoming stretch goals. At the end of the campaign, Igarashi and other key people behind the project appeared on a four-hour countdown live stream. During the live stream, fans could make Igarashi shout classic lines from his earlier games by tweeting them enough times on Twitter and make him try to enact action moves from his games should the live stream become

popular enough. In the end, almost all of these campaign achievements were unlocked, and it is easy to see how the social media strategy worked both in harnessing the fan community to spread the word (i.e. viral marketing), as all of this crowdsourced labour worked towards getting additional backers and subsequently additional funds for the project.

There were also other ways in which fans contributed to the project work. During the *Conan* campaign, funders had seemingly endless questions about issues such as shipping, details about payment and release dates. This soon resulted in existing backers addressing many of the questions for more recent funders, this way substituting for Monolith's community manager when he was not available. Such behaviour no doubt stemmed from the commonly shared feeling of wanting the project to succeed and grow as large as possible. Backers also openly discussed whether to spend more money on the project, or 'up their pledge'. Again, all backer spending within the campaign works towards achieving a larger game, this way benefitting all of the funders. Consequently, backers enticed each other to spend more money through a behaviour that can be argued to be a form of 'herding' (see e.g. Bretschneider & Leimeister 2017; Agrawal et al. 2014). What is clear is that backers embrace crowdfunding projects as something more than a funder: everybody involved is a stakeholder, whether it is about spending more money, enticing others to do so, or creating a more welcoming community for new funders. This goes to the heart of the crowdfunding model as a quite an important 'behavioural law'; being nice and helpful to new backers (who still have the opportunity to leave the project mid-way through) is good for everybody, therefore making backers a willing work force.

For some, this kind of work could be considered a motivational reason for participating in interesting crowdfunding campaigns, in other words wanting to help for e.g. altruistic reasons. In the following section, I turn to examine the various other reasons backers take part in game crowdfunding.

Attitudes towards crowdfunding, and motivations to participate

One of the overarching themes of this dissertation is to show how games crowdfunding is much more than just a funding mechanism. Subsequently, this leads research into questions as to why people participate in crowdfunding. Since crowdfunding is a complex phenomenon with many sides, it is only natural that there are a variety of motivations to participate in it as a backer. This question is interesting

because of an interplay of two factors. First, the majority of backers see crowdfunding to be buying or pre-ordering the in-development product. Second, crowdfunding is by no means the cheapest or most efficient way to get the product. So why do they do it? As a general claim of this chapter, backers participate in and 'use' crowdfunding in various other ways, besides those that are more generally accepted. Articles 2 and 3 both display some expected and unexpected results in terms of backer motivations for participation.

Article 2 investigated the motivations of crowdfunding backers for participating in crowdfunding through an online survey (n=426). Specifically, the aim was to investigate how 1) different values attached to crowdfunding affect the attitude of backers towards the crowdfunding model, and 2) what is the relationship between perceived enjoyment and continued backing intentions. The analysis of the quantitative sections in the survey confirmed many of the hypotheses of the article, including that perceived usefulness, low cost, enjoyment and social influence were all positively associated with both the funders' attitude towards crowdfunding and their continued backing intentions. As expected, it was also proven that various cynical perceptions towards the model (e.g. that 'it is hard to trust the model since large corporations have appropriated it for marketing purposes') had a negative association with attitude and continued backing intentions.

In addition to these results, there were also some surprising discrepancies related to either or both of the associated hypotheses. First, product quality, community and co-creation aspects did not have relevant significance (i.e. a clear positive association) with enjoying crowdfunding participation. In fact, valuing community aspects had a negative association with continued backing intentions. Second, altruistic, anti-corporate, novelty and rarity aspects all were positively associated with only one of the two hypotheses. For example, while the ideological aspects such as altruism and anti-corporate sentiments had a positive association with the attitude towards crowdfunding, they did not seem to translate further into actual continued backing behaviour. Instead, more individualistic, gain-seeking related motivations such as usefulness and seeking cost benefits were proved to be dominant predictors of continued backing. Therefore, while backers with a willingness to help others and support independent productions may perceive crowdfunding more positively, they might not be more willing to actually fund more crowdfunding projects than those backers for whom such aspects are not important.

Article 3 focused on the open answer sections of the survey through analysis that identified emerging themes from the answers. The identified themes were then elaborated and reflected through the quantitative results. The analysis aimed to give

depth to the findings from the quantitative part of the survey and tease out findings that partly or entirely fell outside of the quantitative results. In the following section, a synthesis of these results is presented, highlighting various reasons for backer participation in games crowdfunding.

The pragmatist point of view: Getting the product

Crowdfunding is not the most logical or efficient way of getting games. Typically, digital games decrease quite quickly in price after their general launch, thus often making the campaign price comparably high. Campaigns are also often late in delivering the game and might even be cancelled altogether. Still, a very high number of respondents highlighted in their open answers some kind of pragmatic reason for their participation that sidesteps this kind of reasoning. A clear majority of these kinds of motivations revolved around different aspects related to the game product itself. Crowdfunding is a means to acquire a product that the backer wants for whatever reason (such as it having an interesting game mechanic or theme). For many, crowdfunding allows getting products that are 'tailor-made' for them, i.e. items that are aimed at a very specific but narrow audience and would be difficult or impossible to get from anywhere else. Often, this means niche-market products with relatively small production runs. One respondent singled out funding *Bloodstained* as a way to get a new Castlevania-style game, since Konami would not continue the series. For another, crowdfunding allowed getting digital games as physical copies, something they described as the return of the tangible product. Several respondents brought up further pragmatic reasons such as crowdfunding offering them a good deal in terms of content-price balance, overall price, or delivery and distribution.

Some backers just wish to be entertained, i.e. they want to be presented with exciting, interesting or unique products that captured their imagination – something that the crowdfunding platforms with their social recommendation systems are designed to do. One respondent described how crowdfunding represented an environment that keeps producing "unique and interesting" games that they wanted to see more of. The exclusiveness of the products was often brought up as a reason for participation. After the campaign, a crowdfunded product might not be available anywhere else in the same form. It is a widely used practice to offer extra content or material on top of the core product that is exclusive to campaign backers. Some games are even directly advertised as crowdfunding exclusive, i.e. that the game is only ever available through that campaign. Several respondents specifically told that they enjoyed getting exclusive content.

Surprisingly in the survey, enjoying rarity aspects were negatively associated with a positive attitude towards crowdfunding, despite having a positive association with continued backing intentions. This discrepancy could be seen to be the flip-side of exclusiveness, where some respondents dislike campaigns that offer exclusive product features during the campaign phase, i.e. the use of artificial scarcity mechanisms. Despite these feelings of resentment, backers might still feel compelled to continue backing, i.e. to collect these nevertheless interesting products while there is still a chance to do so. As one respondent put it:

> "I really hate the shift toward Kickstarter. I wish companies would do things themselves. However, I find myself almost forced to participate in these campaigns in order to get complete products." (ID28)

Philanthropic attitudes and the conflict with the pragmatic view

Contrary to the more pragmatist view, many respondents felt that on a more general level, crowdfunding is about helping bring products that 'should exist' into reality, or more specifically, to help create products that would not otherwise get made. While these two mind-sets are not necessarily mutually exclusive, a significant number of respondents specifically felt that at its heart, crowdfunding is not about acquiring the crowdfunded product (even when it is offered as a reward). These responses with a more philanthropic motive could be divided into two stances: first, as endorsing arts or science or fostering innovation (i.e. turning interesting and worthy product ideas into reality); and second, having a more creator-centric attitude, focused on giving worthy creators an opportunity or helping a cause. Many told specifically that it was important to support small or independent creators (e.g. in opposition to large companies who they felt did not listen to fans).

Bringing up the decline of the small creators, one answer highlighted the evolution of the crowdfunding space, which initially was full of small "I have a dream" project creators but now was being dominated by companies of different sizes offering more or less completed products: "While I enjoy getting a good product at the end of the day, I do miss more of the ["I have a dream"] type campaigns, which I feel defines what crowd funding should be about." (Respondent ID71) Still, some respondents considered crowdfunding to be a combination of philanthropy and a means to get products they like. As such, they felt that crowdfunding is beneficial for both the creators and the backers. "[I]f it's a product I'm interested in and it helps someone out it's a win win", and continued: "I get a cool thing and a good feeling" (Respondent ID75).

Since the basic premise of crowdfunding is to back a risky venture, it is important to make a note on how many backers seem to view crowdfunding simply as a pre-order system. A large section of backers for example feels that, should a project end up failing, the project creators are still required to compensate them akin to a regular store. In the quantitative data, three quarters of the respondents reported to at least somewhat agree that crowdfunding a product is like pre-ordering it, and roughly two thirds of the respondents agreed that crowdfunding a product is the same as buying that product. One respondent wondered "is it really crowd funding or just a pre-order [...] with a social touch..." (ID157) Another respondent saw that because "[t]hings have been professionalized, […] backers have come to expect a professional product and often treat crowd funding as a pre-order system" (ID71). Therefore, one of the most interesting observations in these findings is this divide between a) backers who view crowdfunding as a 'store' where products can be bought or pre-ordered, and b) backers who see that the whole system as being built on a more altruistic principle that takes into account the risk of project failure as a necessity.

The backer-developer connection

One of the first aspects that cultural research connected games crowdfunding to is the "backer-developer connection", i.e. how backers are able to influence the produced game through the model (Smith 2015). In the open answer sections of the survey, a category that gathered a lot of mentions was development and the different facets related to it. First of all, many respondents feel that following the development process through project updates is interesting or enjoyable. On the other hand, many backers feel that regular updates after the campaign are also a very important part of the project, whether it is to signal backers that work is progressing on the project, or simply to follow developments because it is seen to be interesting. As a personal observation, having followed dozens of campaigns myself, it has come up again and again how dismayed backers are about project creators who do not provide regular updates. Highlighting the importance of backer-creator communication, one respondent told that:

> "[A]s I view my money as a microinvestment I do believe I am entitled to know what is going on with the process. […] At least a fifth of my backed projects are ones I have backed without selecting a reward, but I am just as interested in knowing what happens and there's a sense of loss when a creator doesn't update." (ID2)

As such, besides mere obligation, there is additional value in providing updates, and several answers in the survey directly stated that the respondent liked to "watch" development. In the survey answers, almost three quarters of respondents at least somewhat agreed that "[p]articipating in a crowdfunding campaign feels like taking part in the product's development." Following project updates can also offer a way to better understand or appreciate the development process, whether it was about software development or a physical production process such as creating a miniature-based board game. One respondent felt that:

> "Most people who buy things have no idea what goes into making those things. A good side-effect of crowdfunding (and similar communities, such as web comics) is that people who otherwise wouldn't be involved in creative endeavours become educated about the process. It's not an assembly line with a predictable outcome at the end and never has been." (ID194)

In the above excerpt, the respondent alludes to the fact that some projects that have run into multiple problems along the development process offer backers a view into the mundane reality of game development, of which ill-advised decisions, dead ends, backing up and starting over are an inherent part of the process. Furthermore, a certain level of transparency in terms of this reality is an integral part of games crowdfunding. However, at the same time it is clear that many backers do not see it this way, demanding a process that goes smoothly where the finished product is delivered with no considerable slowdown.

In the context of development, the possible appeal of being able to co-create content with developers is a significant factor that needs to be considered. Previous studies have linked co-creation opportunities with crowdfunding, and that this opportunity is most welcomed by backers (e.g. Smith 2015; Vanderhoef 2016). Among our respondents however, opportunities for co-creation were viewed with mixed feelings. There were some responses in the open answers that directly identified taking part in the development process as an important aspect. In the survey, two out of three respondents at least somewhat agreed that backing a campaign offered the respondent ways to influence the development of the crowdfunded product. Furthermore, over half of the respondents at least partly agreed that in backing a crowdfunding campaign, they wanted to influence the product's development. Overall, however, in the quantitative results, participating in the development of the crowdfunded product had no significant association with backer attitude and a minor negative association with continued backing intentions. The most immediate explanation for this is that many backers consider the crowdfunding system as a means to empower cultural creators whose vision they

trust. Subsequently, those backers are not very interested in controlling the final shape of the product beyond greenlighting the initial concept. Instead of a hands-on co-creation, they prefer a more hands-off position of overseeing the production. This could be seen as reinforcing the view that backers revere the position of a clearly appointed cultural author, i.e. the 'voice' of the author coming through cultural products themselves such as games. The autonomy of the author is supported by respondents who also harboured anti-capitalist sentiments, e.g. that crowdfunding allows ways to bypass the production models favoured by large corporations where individual author expression is typically not favoured. As one respondent put it:

> "[Crowdfunding] can be a tremendous tool to allowing smaller creators with big ideas to get their projects made. Especially without being tampered with by investors or other parties. […]. Creator control to see a vision through start to finish is important to me." (Respondent ID76)

Other than the broader thematic categories mentioned above, a few smaller but important themes emerged from the open answer responses. In terms of the political economy of the game industries, respondents brought up views about the relationship between crowdfunding and the surrounding game industry. For example, some respondents told that they wanted to make a difference, e.g. to nurture a better kind of game culture through greenlighting quality games. Some respondents linked this sentiment to existing production structures in the game industry, with one specifying that: "[I]n general [I participate in crowdfunding to] lower the influence of publishers on game making" (ID146). Another one told:

> "Certainly for video games, which make up the majority of my backed projects, [crowdfunding] allows developers to take risks they would not be able to do under the thumb of AAA publishers. I strongly think that's worth supporting." (ID93)

Echoing the analysis on the increased need for marketing (in Chapter 4.1), some respondents felt that the crowdfunding model in general has become too saturated to function anymore. Similarly, some responses highlighted the fact that there have been too many high-profile campaigns that have failed, and now potential backers might fear (perhaps unnecessarily) that this is a trend with smaller campaigns too.

4.3 Crowdfunding signifies the future of game retail

This final results summary chapter examines the relationship between games crowdfunding and the ongoing transformation of game retail. The continued tendency of the larger game industry to move the risks of production forward (Kline et al. 2003; Lolli 2018) has had many effects on the value chains of digital games. In the traditional publishing space, this can be seen in several ways, including how publishers are turning games into services in order to completely control their distribution and use, as well as the horizontal, vertical and diagonal integration among value chain actors. These integration processes have put more and more power into the hands of the platform holders, and as a result have had an enormous effect on those value chain actors who cannot compete with the platform holders, such as traditional distributors and retailers. Not only that, these actions have had a significant effect on the very form of digital games, as games are created, reshaped and repurposed for new kinds of monetisation logics and distribution platforms. In the spirit of the wider dissertation, this chapter uses games crowdfunding as a lens to magnify and examine the changes that have taken place in the traditional retail culture during the last decade or so, arguing that crowdfunding exemplifies both many of the trends affecting retail and what the future of game retail looks like.

In the following section, I will go over how games are sold through crowdfunding and consider the ways that pre-ordering and collector's editions in the traditional game industry link to similar schemes in the crowdfunding model. I will argue that selling games through the crowdfunding model is a way to avoid some of the problems associated with traditional retail. As a result, it gives us a look at where the game retail space is headed as the surrounding industry takes similar steps. Consequently, I argue that some of the changes signposted by the crowdfunding space will become standard elsewhere as well. Crowdfunding is found to connect to a larger transition of media retail, where the old retail industry crumbles and subsequently new strategies take hold in order to replace the old retail environment. However, what stands in the way of crowdfunding becoming the ideal model for the future of retail is that crowdfunding is a hybrid of buying and backing. In a problematic way, this blurs the lines in terms of how backers feel it should be approached. At the same time, however, this hybrid nature has an important effect on how games are sold, as backers become agents of retail in a process of the 'retailisation of consumption'.

Game retail 2.0?

Crowdfunding can be considered a form of online retail, and is considered as such by many backers. In its professional-looking, 'platformised' form, the layout of a typical Kickstarter page resembles an online storefront. The top of the campaign page is reserved for the pitch video – the 'commercial' – which almost all campaigns use nowadays. Next to the video, the page displays the progress and the goal of the campaign, the backer count, the remaining campaign time, and a highlighted 'Back this project' button. After the campaign has closed, the 'Back this campaign' button is typically replaced with a suitable new button, such as 'Follow the development', linking to a development blog, 'Late-pledge this project', linking to a separate pledge management service, or 'Buy it now', linking to a digital storefront if the game has already been released. The Kickstarter page displays the items that the campaign aims to sell – or pre-sell – as packaged reward tiers. These are presented on the side panel of the page, with the cheapest tier on the top and the possible additional options, getting gradually more expensive when scrolling down the page.

The changes in the techno-economic environment that have taken place during the last two decades have profoundly affected selling games (detailed in Chapter 3). Vertical integration within the game industry has aimed to cut out the traditional middlemen such as distribution and retail, as these subtract from the revenue stream. This process has been helmed by platform holders such as Nintendo and Sony who want to maximize their control where-ever they can. As such, this and other changes have put traditional retail into a state of crisis, and for example, GameStop (the largest game retail chain in the world) has kept closing stores at a steady pace. One area that explains this process is the declining business of selling second-hand games. Retail gets more money out of used games and wants to emphasize these sales. At the same time, the platform holders and game service providers, and the value chain actors that are either creating games or monetizing their creation or distribution are at a clear advantage. They want to sell games too, and the new technologies offer ways, firstly to get back a piece of the second-hand sales (through strategies utilizing downloadable add-on content; see e.g. Nieborg 2014) and, secondly to create games that cannot be re-sold, i.e. games charged by monthly rates and free games monetized through micro-transactions. Publishers and platform holders can also incentivize pre-orders in many ways to make sure that a maximum number of customers buy the game on day one, in this way minimizing the number of potential customers who would buy the game as a second-hand copy.

Crowdfunding can also be connected to the trajectories of cutting out retail and combating second-hand sales. The crowdfunding model circumvents many of the problems associated with the traditional retail environment: indeed, one of its central premises is cutting out all of the 'unnecessary' middlemen, including retail, only from the point of view of the game developer. Due to cheaper and simpler production processes, crowdfunded games are often distributed in a digital-only form which prevents re-selling them. But the model combats second-hand sales through other means too, as games are technically pre-ordered, as interested backers pay for them before the game is even created. If physical copies are promised, they are made to order; there is no production surplus, and as the produced games are collector's editions by nature, this lessens the chance that they are resold.

For over three decades, retail copies of published games were the only way for player-customers to get the games they wanted. For some time following the introduction of digital distribution, all of the major game releases used to receive a physical retail version of the game at the launch, and after some time these would transfer to be made available only via digital distribution. Currently, thousands of old games are available on various digital distribution platforms, while at the same time there is a sizeable market for collecting physical, boxed editions of old games. This is part of a recognised collector culture revolving around perfecting libraries of physically released games on a given console, obtaining rare releases from jumble sales and conventions, and showcasing and discussing collectable games on dedicated YouTube channels.

Games crowdfunding has many tangents with collector culture. As with traditionally sold games, many game crowdfunding campaigns often offer expensive collector's editions that are reported to be part of a small limited printing. Many crowdfunding projects, however, state that besides a campaign-exclusive physical release, there will be no general release in physical retail channels. Because the majority of crowdfunded digital games are being released only through digital distribution, a physical release for a game might be considered a specialty or luxury item. Higher reward tiers frequently offer campaign-exclusive versions of the game, and offers promoting exclusivity grab backers' attention. In our quantitative survey answers, three out of four respondents agreed at least partially that "I sometimes fear that I will miss out on a good offer unless I back a campaign". Consequently, higher tier campaign versions of crowdfunded games often become collectable rarities, as they are typically not available elsewhere after the campaign.

On the other hand, games crowdfunding is a part of a bigger techno-economic change that directly attacks the traditional collector culture. The digital distribution

of games, in general, is eroding the collector culture based on physical editions, as a growing percentage of releases do not feature a boxed release at all. At the same time, the crowdfunding model is supplying the market with an exceeding number of collector editions, and single campaigns such as *Bloodstained* often offer multiple differing collector's edition options on different reward tiers. Usually, buying the most expensive option will give the backer all of the exclusive content it is possible to get, but sometimes even this is not enough as some mid-tier rewards might offer content exclusive to that specific tier. This way, backers oriented towards collecting sometimes feel forced to 'pre-order' the crowdfunded game due to the campaign exclusive content or packaging (or even several versions of the game), and consequently feeling irritated by this (also discussed in Chapter 4.2). As mentioned, many campaigns make a point about emphasizing the exclusivity of the boxed edition and included extra content, thus forcefully utilising an artificial scarcity in their marketing approaches.

Yet another side to this collector's edition culture are the emergence of campaigns that seek funding to produce a print run of a completed or almost-completed game. This is especially common on the tabletop gaming side, but appears more and more on digital gaming campaigns too (e.g. funding print runs for new homebrew NES games). Stepping beyond the similarities between exclusive editions in traditional publishing and games crowdfunding, this kind of retail logic signifies where traditional publishing is headed with selling boxed editions of games: namely small, limited runs of game copies made-to-order for a connoisseur audience. What remains to be seen is what such a transition means for collectors (e.g. are they willing to order new physical copies for a higher price instead of looking for bargain bin or thrift market deals).

One of the differences that retailing through crowdfunding has with bricks-and-mortar retail and digital storefronts is the collective nature of the crowdfunding campaign experience. On the comments section of a popular crowdfunding campaign, whenever yet another stretch goal is close to being reached, a communal feeling of enthusiasm can be witnessed and is often contagious. In a polemic blog post about crowdfunding, Ian Bogost argued that we often do not even really want what we are funding - instead, backing a project is like "buying a ticket on the ride, reserving a front-row seat to the process", "[f]or the experience of watching it succeed beyond expectations or to fail dramatically" (Bogost 2012). Perhaps acknowledging this feeling of spectacle as an important part of campaign momentum, Kickstarter now offers a 'Kickstarter Live' option: an option for the creators to include platform supported live streaming on their project site, for

example to discuss the latest stretch goals. Here, the project creator has a possibility to perform as a 'show host', or even a celebrity, who every night appears on the 'familiar channel' advertising, informing, answering questions and building community. (For more on "spectating development", see Chapter 4.2.) As such, popular crowdfunding campaigns can be turned into shared spectacles that concentrate and celebrate the upcoming product.

Further connecting the crowdfunding model to this kind of spectacle, Bogost compared crowdfunding to TV shopping channels. Typically, products are presented as special, campaign-exclusive offers that are available only for a short time. Often, both in crowdfunding and on shopping channels, there are special tie-in products that you can get as free 'throw-in gifts', but only if you 'act fast!' As with crowdfunding, TV shopping channel product demonstrations are often presented in front of an audience that gives applause and 'sets the tone', as if convincing the viewer that 'this truly is an especially good offer!' However, unlike the shopping channel, crowdfunding campaigns are speaking to an enthusiast audience that is specifically there because of their excitement for that particular product. As such, the negative connotation one might attach to shopping channel retail is largely absent within a backer community.

Backing, buying and selling

Complicating the status of crowdfunding as the future of retail is the multi-faceted nature of the backer community. While for some backers participating in crowdfunding quite literally means buying the game, for others it is most of all an act of altruism – giving worthy creators a chance. First, the majority of backers see participating in a successful crowdfunding campaign as buying or pre-ordering. After a few high-profile Kickstarter campaigns ended up being cancelled, members of their backer communities sued the campaign creators, resulting in a US court order that ordered the creators to pay back the backers what they were owed. As a result, Kickstarter altered its regulations and guidelines concerning creator responsibilities, while at the same time adding new store-like options such as bulk-reward tiers. Even though these changes were targeted to clarify the principles according to which the platform works, they were in contrast with a previous statement by the platform leadership declaring that: "Kickstarter is not a store" (Kickstarter 2012), prompting The Economist to reply: "Kickstarter is a store, after all" (The Economist 2014).

It is clear that games crowdfunding on Kickstarter bears a resemblance to pre-ordering. An often-cited business study by Belleflamme, Lambert and Schwienbacher (2014) calls reward-based crowdfunding the 'pre-ordering form' of crowdfunding. Some campaigns – such as the campaign for *Fear Effect Sedna* (Sushee, 2018) – have labelled one or more reward tiers directly as "Pre-order". The similarities between regular pre-ordering and crowdfunding are also reflected in the attitudes of the backers. In their interview study, Gerber and Hui (2013) found that many backers "refer to the transaction as 'buying' and 'getting,' suggesting that crowdfunding shares some elements with the consumer experience." Furthermore, in our survey results, three quarters of the respondents reported that they at least somewhat agreed that 'crowdfunding a product is like pre-ordering it'. Roughly two thirds at least partly agreed that crowdfunding a product is the same as buying that product. As mentioned earlier, some campaigns state clearly that they are funding a print run of a finished game or offer bulk-reward tiers that are directed to retailers interested in re-selling the game (e.g. 'Retailer tier - Get 10 copies of the game for a small discount').

However, the status of crowdfunding as pre-ordering is somewhat problematic. To begin with, there is the uncertainty associated with the model. For example, Mollick (2014) found out that only one quarter of projects delivered the promised rewards on time, and one third of his sample had not delivered at the end of the research period. This uncertainty of Kickstarter as a platform for risky endeavours was precisely what the Kickstarter staff alluded to in their original pronouncement that "Kickstarter is not a store" (Kickstarter 2012). The origins of the concept are rooted in altruistic thinking at least as much as the model is based on handing out rewards. This was reflected in the results of our survey, too. Contrary to those survey respondents in the quantitative results who saw the model as buying or pre-ordering, there were many respondents who in their open answers positioned themselves in clear opposition to seeing the model as a store, arguing that the model is first and foremost about giving worthy creators a chance (for more, see Chapter 4.2). For these respondents, this meant accepting the risk of failure associated with crowdfunding projects. However, as the platform has become more and more saturated with projects, the demands for both increasing marketing efforts and a more polished prototype have risen. In turn, this means that an increasing number of Kickstarter projects propose products that seem very far along in their development process, or they are in fact finished, making the platform seem more like a store. This has no doubt started to shape the perceptions of the wider audience.

Crowdfunding actively works to decentralize some of the existing models of retail. At the same time, as game retail is moving away from traditional stores, different phases in the production and distribution of video games adopt the characteristics of retail. First, crowdfunding offers a retailisation of game development. Instead of only focusing on delivering the game, the development team activities are now connected to the crowdfunding campaign that ultimately determines the magnitude of the product. Simultaneously, as the retailers and publishers are removed from the picture, game developers are asked to master many tasks that were traditionally associated with retailers, including various methods of trying to sell the product directly to customers. In moving from the business-to-business model to the more direct business-to-customer model, developers need to provide customer support, create enticing campaign pages and project updates, and even sell the game through live video streaming.

Second, crowdfunding also results in a retailisation of consumption. In addition to the roles of funders and buyers, backers have a third role, that of selling games. Crowdfunding backers are overwhelmingly people who have come together to support a campaign towards which they are very amicable or even enthusiastic. Many backers visit an open campaign page several times during a campaign and take part in the general (often enthusiastic) discussion surrounding the project. This has various consequences. First, existing backers often try to help by welcoming new backers and offering answers to frequently asked questions. Second, as most projects use stretch goals (i.e. the more money is collected, the more expanded the game becomes for every backer), community members might organize themselves to entice new backers to join. Third, members sometimes persuade existing backers to raise their pledge or let themselves be persuaded to do the same. During the *Conan* campaign, for example, new backers had endless questions about issues such as shipping, payments, and release dates. This resulted in existing backers addressing many of these questions for newcomers, substituting for Monolith's community manager when he was not available. Backers also openly discussed whether to spend more money on the project, or "up their pledge", to help reach upcoming stretch goals quicker. Many backers raised their pledge gradually as new stretch goals and optional add-ons were revealed, eventually declaring that they would go "all in", i.e. getting all the content there was to get (costing roughly $650, in contrast to $90 asked for the base game).

Identifying this predisposition of backers to aid in the sales process, it is now common practice among crowdfunding campaign creators to ask the existing backer community to spread the word in their social media channels, with the shared

understanding that the more backers and collected funds there are, the more content everybody gets. On a tight development budget, outsourcing functions of retail to backers might be an invaluable option and sometimes the only way to success. When project creators address the concerns of the backers, for example through a project community forum, they meet them on a peer-to-peer level, an access that is perceived as extremely valuable in modern marketing. One of the central ways to create long-term brand loyalty in contemporary social network markets is through social influence, for example getting a customer to recommend a product to a friend. Here, game development, game retail, and fan communities all create new hybrid relationships that exemplify new, participatory forms of media consumption.

5 DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSIONS

This final chapter is divided into discussion and conclusions sections. In the discussion, I hope to expand my analysis to touch on some of the lingering issues brought forward by the research that still remain elusive. The conclusions section sums up the analysis presented in the results chapters and considers their combined meaning. I also consider the implications of the dissertation for game studies, game production studies, production studies more generally, and for game crowdfunding studies. Finally, I reflect on possible future directions for the study of games crowdfunding.

Discussion

Throughout this study, I have stressed that crowdfunding is a much more multifaceted phenomenon than simply a method to finance game development. I have described many of these facets in the previous chapter, yet several implications that originate from the presented results remain to be discussed. In this discussion section I wish to further explore five themes that I find relevant for discussion. These are: 1) the ever-rising need of marketing in the context of crowdfunding; 2) how games crowdfunding exemplifies many facets of the platformisation of cultural production; 3) the precarity of game work in the crowdfunding space; 4) the boundaries between production and consumption in the crowdfunding context; and 5) the implications of games crowdfunding for game publishing.

The rising need of marketing

The examination of the case example games made it clear that the role of marketing has risen to significant heights. While traditional business logic would dictate that all actions of a company can be considered as 'marketing', there were several stages within the example projects that required marketing both in the traditional sense of promotion, and also in creative new ways. A project first needs to stand out on the

crowdfunding platform. There, too, the number of proposed projects has been rising all the time. Notably, there are fewer and fewer 'trash projects', i.e. projects that do not collect any money (Bidaux 2018), signalling that the average quality of projects is rising and that it is more difficult for an average project to get noticed. Additionally, Kickstarter has its own internal logic for endorsing projects (marking it with a "Project We Love" sign) and highlighting them both on their frontpage and in their "Games You Can Play Right Now!" section. This is one of the key instances where a supposedly neutral and democratic platform engages in very factual selection and gatekeeping in terms of the content it hosts (cf. Gillespie 2017; Swords 2017). But even if the crowdfunding phase is successful and the game gets finished, there is also the much larger issue of getting noticed on a popular marketplace like Steam. Due to the move towards platform economics (and therefore towards a more democratic distribution environment), this is extremely difficult to achieve without a large marketing budget. On average over 650 games were released on Steam every month in 2019.[5] So, developers need to do everything they can to stand out, both in the crowdfunding phase and elsewhere.

The crowdfunding model also causes changes in the timetable or production lifecycle in game development. Tasks like marketing need to be considered much earlier in the production cycle than previously. The *Bloodstained* project started its marketing campaign over half a year in advance. Increasingly in the crowdfunding model, key tasks like building a polished prototype need to be done before the actual campaign phase, as it has become more and more important to showcase it already at the start of the campaign. As the crowdfunding space has become increasingly saturated with more and more complete game prototypes, the barrier to entry has risen in terms of how advanced the prototype should be.

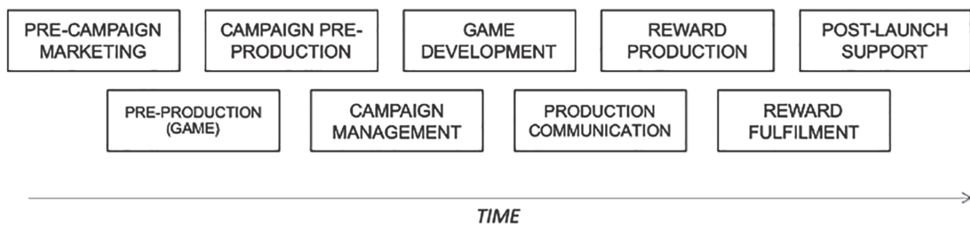

Figure 12. Production phases within games crowdfunding

[5] SteamSpy: https://steamspy.com/year/

Figure 12 displays a rough order of the different tasks within games crowdfunding, while Figure 13 showcases the intensity of marketing needed in different project phases. Marketing starts prior to the campaign and is at its most intense during the funding period. It then continues – at least at a bare minimum level – in the form of constant project updates during the period between the end of the campaign and the release of the game. Marketing heightens in anticipation of the game's launch and continues for some time after that to support post-launch sales, in the form of advertisements, patches and game updates, and the crowdfunding project updates that communicate and market them.

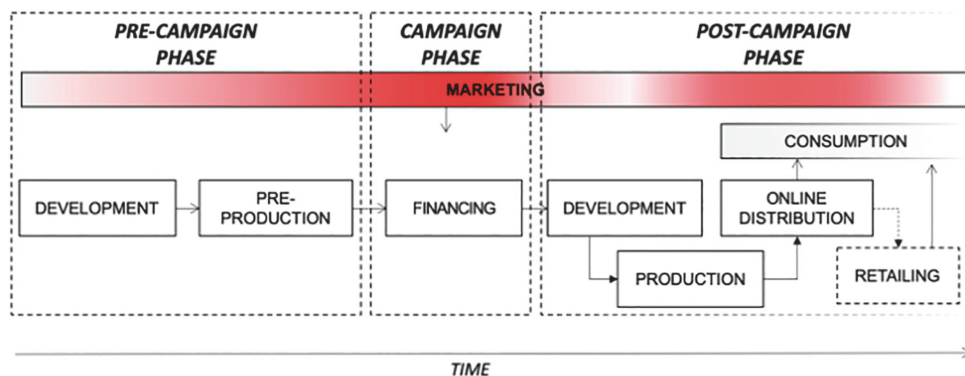

Figure 13. The intensity of marketing during different project phases

Thus, the argument that the model offers an opportunity to fail quickly and cheaply (Mollick 2014) becomes invalidated, as this kind of thinking glosses over the work effort and expense needed already prior to the campaign phase. As a further consideration, later in the development phase crowdfunding works completely in the opposite way. Some projects come to a halt in their development phase, mainly having run out of funds or due to finding more and more problems with their initial designs. In such a situation, it might seem like a good idea to discard the production in favour of starting a new project. However, within the crowdfunding model it is very difficult to abandon a project due to an audience backlash that might seriously damage the developer's reputation.

Platformisation of cultural production

This study connects to the larger project of researching and discussing the phenomenon of platformisation (Gillespie 2010), particularly platformisation of cultural production (Nieborg & Poell 2018; Duffy et al. 2019; Nieborg et al. 2020). Through bringing in a new case of platformisation, games crowdfunding, the dissertation tries to expand on what the concept of platformisation of cultural production has been previously used to describe. In some ways it conforms to the conceptualisation by Nieborg and Poell (2018), but like some of the later research it pivots into a direction of its own (cf. Close & Wang 2020; Partin 2020; Kneese & Palm 2020). Instead of being a result of this research *per se*, the focusing on platformisation is used to contextualise and discuss the results.

There is an inherent dilemma within the ethos of games crowdfunding (and largely within crowdfunding in general). On one hand, crowdfunding as a system, sends a message that is a more democratic way of production that takes the power from the gatekeepers and puts it into the hands of the developers and the crowd in a dispersed form. However, in one way it is doing precisely the opposite, in that it is concentrating power into the hands of the few: i.e. the crowdfunding platform. This conflict is discussed in the scholarship concentrated on platforms and the platformisation process. Exploring the concept of 'platform' in relation to the largest platform-based conglomerates like Google, Gillespie (2010) argues how the concept is carefully chosen due to the connotations it carries: a level structure that is technology-neutral, egalitarian, and supports all who stand on it. For Gillespie, this kind of rhetoric is an attempt to balance between advertisers, users, producers and regulators (ibid.), and is largely successful in achieving this aim. While a crowdfunding platform like Kickstarter differs from Amazon, Google and Apple in some respects, the same kind of rhetoric has been at the heart of the "emancipatory-utopian framework" identified by Planells (2017) around games crowdfunding. This rhetoric can also be identified in the early campaign pitch videos of game studios that gained success in the crowdfunding environment, such as inXile Entertainment and Double Fine.

In previous research, the phenomenon of platformisation of cultural production has been discussed especially in analysing social media platforms, particularly how platforms exercise power (Gillespie 2010) and how the platformisation process starts to shape cultural production indirectly through multi-sided markets and the contingency of products (Nieborg & Poell 2018). In comparison, crowdfunding represents a more direct form of platformised cultural production, one that is

particularly devious as it is so taken-for-granted. On one hand, crowdfunding can be argued to be a process of 'packaging' free-form cultural production, through platformisation, into a more standardised and commercial form. This process of packaging independent game production is an example of a larger capitalist mechanism of constantly appropriating, assimilating and selling of free-form market movement. While cultural production in the crowdfunding model might not be contingent on platform companies like Kickstarter, we can see a push to that direction. It is a process that ultimately directs potential customers towards established and streamlined sales channels, while at the same time this kind of streamlining works to draw the formerly free-from activity into a framework that is controlled, supervised, moderated, and guided towards certain preferred directions. This controlling does not need to be even a conscious act. Rather, it is something that happens as a by-product of platformisation. Among many other things, it can be witnessed in the crowdfunding model in how certain game genres become popular, saturating the crowdfunding space with design choices that are typical for those games, while at the same time, more and more, drowning alternative designs. Following a similar line of thought, seen through platformisation games crowdfunding can be identified as a form of 'professionalisation' of independent game development: i.e. as a system crowdfunding tries to make game development more professional, by introducing a template according to which business should be handled.

Some of the facets of the platformisation process identified by Nieborg and Poell (2018) can also be identified within crowdfunding. First, if we take the 'traditional' game industry as a starting point and a point of comparison, it can be witnessed how, when entering the crowdfunding system, markets first turn to two-sided markets (i.e. the ideal of digital distribution and cutting out all other intermediaries besides the developer and the customer), and then are drawn towards multisided markets (i.e. developers needing the help of new kinds of intermediaries, thus helping the growth of a new multi-sided production environment), with the producers and intermediaries being subjected to the political economy of multi-sided markets. In terms of marketing, games crowdfunding is also very dependent on other (social network) platforms.

Second, the accumulation of money and power among crowdfunded cultural production can be traced not only to the crowdfunding platform itself, but also to the saturated environment supporting those with more resources to stand out from the crowd (by various means). Here, smaller creators who might often have the most transgressive ideas are the ones who need to prove themselves (i.e. prove that the

project will be completed) with a very advanced prototype of the kind one often sees on Kickstarter. Thus they need to have completed a great deal of the work already before asking for funding. At the same time, bigger names like Double Fine have the luxury of being able to run a crowdfunding campaign with no other promise than that "we'll make a point'n'click adventure with this money". As a result, the system is skewed towards safer, less transgressive ideas and towards being a 'pre-order store'.

Third, crowdfunding platforms can be clearly seen as transforming the infrastructure of the associated cultural production in various ways. These include a need to structure the production according to the underlying and emerging demands of the system, such as having to embrace the (now) accepted norms associated with crowdfunding (for example various marketing practices and creator-backer communication) and use the crowdfunding platform project website in very particular ways. This is crucial to understanding how platforms like Kickstarter shape the organisation of game production in ways that alter the entire production logic from the traditional publishing logic towards a platform logic, while still ending up being a hybrid logic of its own.

Finally, it should be pointed out that the different stakeholders – developers, intermediaries and backers – also end up shaping the crowdfunding platform (cf. Duffy et al. 2019). Game campaigns have introduced several new campaign practices that are now widely used, such as stretch goals and gamifying campaigns. As certain practices become commonplace, such as the need for creators to give regular campaign updates (also in new ways), the platform is pressured to cater for those needs (e.g. the introduction of Kickstarter Live). Similarly, the needs and demands of the backers have, in a demonstrated way, forced Kickstarter to become more store-like (clearly against the will of the platform owners). However, the position of backers is difficult to pin down as some backers are both "platform complementors" (Nieborg & Poell 2018) who sell games and regular customers who enter the platform arrangement to buy games.

The precarity of game work

Striking out on your own through taking a huge risk, is not only risky, but also stressful and precarious. One of the key ways to study crowdfunding, and moreover how game production is organised on different levels, is to pay critical attention to the sustainability of game work (Whitson et al. 2018). This theme of how sustainable cultural industries work is tightly connected to the political economy analysis of the

hegemonic modes of capitalism as a system that pushes the work into certain kinds of models. The crowdfunding model exemplifies quite aptly how we have moved from the 'traditional' game industry based on the Fordist factory model, to a new 'spirit' based on the "decentralised, lean, and agile networked companies", and how that spirit is now often seen to define the "good life" of this time (Whitson 2019).

For Whitson et al. (2018), focusing on sustainability means looking at the social organization of game work, above all else. An analysis of the political economy of games crowdfunding promptly highlights not only the emerging intermediary network, but also the character of the crowdfunding production model as a system revolving around outsourced game work. Previous research has highlighted some of the ways the game industry, as a system, pushes companies towards outsourcing (O'Donnell 2014; Ozimek 2019), while there is also a large body of work discussing this in a wider cultural industries context (see e.g. Deuze et al. 2007). Outsourcing has been connected to multiple problems. For example, when large studios use an outsourced work force, the deal is enforced with NDAs and heavy sanctions in terms that the outsourcing company can never reveal their involvement or input on the project. O'Donnell (2014) also points out how in this kind of system where the real work is done in secret and cannot be talked about, workers do not get credited for the work they have done in the credits sections of the games. Consequently, in an industry where a proven portfolio of a worker is crucial for getting new work assignments, then working for such an outsourcing company might end up seriously complicating the worker's career advancement.

Overwhelmingly, the economic chain of games crowdfunding is based on project-to-project freelance work that amounts to a portfolio career. Typical for the wider indie game development culture, freelancers often move from one project to another without a dedicated company behind them. Freelancers often interact with each other to strike up new collaborations, often over long distances, and based on relationships created at conventions. In such an industry based on individuals, a reputation can be easily ruined (an extreme example of this was the summer 2019 #metoo moment that took place within game industry). Project creators within the crowdfunding model are responsible for their projects and need to stick with them both due to the semi-public nature of the projects, and the liabilities that come with the model. In some cases, this has meant being stuck with a project, with no opportunity to abandon it if needed, e.g. when funds run out or if collaborators in the project turn out to be overly-difficult or damaging.

Workers without a proper company are likely to miss out on all kinds of standard benefits. Among these are health insurance, and important to the current climate of

fair working conditions and treatment, an HR personnel service. Having followed multiple crowdfunding campaigns as a casual backer, there are several projects where creators bring up issues of stress and anxiety in their project updates (e.g. to explain delays in the timetable), or even cases of abusive or damaging colleagues. Consecutively, it is easy to see how in these kinds of situations, being employed by a company with HR resources (who e.g. could have helped employees to get counselling) would be much better for a developer. Instead, freelancer creators often have to deal with these issues by themselves. Additionally, they might feel forced to open up on private health issues due to the semi-public nature of crowdfunding, such as being forced to give reasons for delays.

In terms of sustainability, the quality of crowdfunded game work is also affected. Due to the extreme emphasis on marketing, transparency and updating, developers are now forced to do increasingly 'relational labour' (Baym, 2018; Whitson et al. 2018). As the development periods in the crowdfunding model are often quite long, with most of projects delivering later than anticipated, the backer audience typically grows restless. This restlessness needs to be managed through regular updating that usually, among other things, requires credible explanation in terms of why there are delays. To have the backer community onside through a long, often stressful development period with perpetual crunch points may be an absolutely crucial aspect to keep oneself going. As a personal note: throughout my research period, across dozens of projects, I saw numerous instances where project creators offered accounts of personal hardships through a sort of 'diary mode' of updating, looking to justify or explain delays with the project. In turn, while appeasing the backer community in such a transparent way can win the hearts of the community, such open (and perhaps forced) disclosure might be very difficult and stressful in itself.

For all its business benefits, the crowdfunding model exemplifies the current 'spirit' of capitalism that seems to harbour an idealised notion of everybody being an entrepreneur who takes care of themselves (see: Whitson 2019). From this kind of macro perspective, the crowdfunding model can be seen as a system where freelancer labour is exploited by larger capitalist drifts. However, it is the hegemonic 'system' – the game industry in a much wider sense – that ultimately benefits from this work. Game makers create games while going through many hardships, and the few games that survive through the system are rewarded by being awarded a place in the digital storefront of the game platform holder – next to thousands of others, as this is of course a more democratic approach.

Between production and consumption: co-creation and spectating development

Since crowdfunding is a complex phenomenon with many sides, it is only natural that there are various motivations to participate in it as a backer. Subsequently, there are several different areas that backer-players might pay attention to in terms of what draws them in, what irritates them, and what is generally speaking important to them in the crowdfunding model.

Crowdfunding backers find themselves in a culture that is tangled with the mundane realities of game development, and alongside it the new kind of media work. Many scholars have argued that production and audiences should be studied together (Mayer 2016; Sotamaa 2009; Meehan 2000); however, this does not mean that the line between the two always ends up becoming blurred in expected ways. Instead of fully seizing the opportunities for co-creation offered by most campaigns, backers do not seem to be that interested in affecting the game content. Instead, the authorship of the creator is seen to be important, this authorship in turn extending to the author's work. In a sense, backers themselves uphold the boundary between production and consumption.

Instead, backers want to watch or spectate development for various reasons. Backers are anxious to know what is going on with the development process; on one hand, they are in a way supervising the process, and on the other hand viewing the process as interesting, educational, and sometimes even entertaining. This is a key observation in that it accentuates the significance and meaning of the pre-launch period of the crowdfunded product. Most crowdfunded products take a long time to finish when measured from their initial announcement to their eventual release. This is a clear departure from the traditional publishing logic, where publishers have usually announced games roughly half a year before their release. As such, the waiting period in the crowdfunding model feels quite long, especially considering the uncertainty that comes with the model. As a result, a unique characteristic of the crowdfunding production logic is the necessity to manage the long waiting period in terms of customer relations. A central need arises to keep backers entertained and preoccupied by regularly updating them, and crucially to explain any delays (that are in fact quite normal behind the scenes of traditional publishing logic). As mentioned earlier, whether developers want it or not, they need to open up their craft to their audience. This is not because the backers actually need to know about game development but because the developers need to do anything they can to put out fires of discontent within the backer community, while at the same time selling themselves in any way they can to turn themselves into something that can be

consumed. In the process, developers turn into something that from the audience perspective can be understood as a ‘creator commodity’.

In the traditional sense that I have been using in this dissertation, crowdfunding precedes various other kinds of micro-funding that have emerged after 2008-2009 when Indiegogo and Kickstarter were launched. One of the secondary goals of my research has been to trace any connections between traditional crowdfunding and the wider gaming culture. Examples of this connection are the newly emerging forms of micro-funding, such as digital patronage on Twitch where streamers can have a steady income of hundreds of thousands, coalescing out of micro-funding contributions. Within this phenomenological field, game development through crowdfunding connects to ‘relational labour’ (Baym 2018) and the necessity of contemporary cultural work to constantly entertain in order not to fall out of spotlight or out of favour. Outside of traditional crowdfunding, this demand connects to game work in ‘live-devving’ or live-streaming game development, which similar to live-streaming play, is now done both for fun and to secure a daily living (see e.g. Consalvo & Phelps 2019).

Independence and game publishing in the context of games crowdfunding

In addition to delayed projects and cancellations, a lot of the grievances over games crowdfunding projects have to do with the independence of the project. As discussed in Chapter 3, the concepts of ‘independent’ and ‘indie’ have generally been used haphazardly in game studies (Garda & Grabarczyk 2016). The same is largely true with player communities. The idea of being ‘independent’ is central to games crowdfunding, but at the same time backers might have differing conceptions about what the term is used to refer to, i.e. what the creator is independent from. For example, is it independence from publishers (as in e.g. *Bloodstained*, Igarashi and Konami), independence from financiers (e.g. being able to create the game entirely with crowdfunded money), or independence from the intended audience (e.g. a developer feeling like they are not responsible to provide updates - a phenomenon rarely seen in the crowdfunding model)?

Financing and/or funding can readily be found at the core of crowdfunding simply because of the name of the model. For many, the central notion of crowdfunding is the freedom from traditional financiers. As this has typically been the publisher, crowdfunding, in turn, is about the freedom and/or independence from the publishers. Still, many projects get a publisher later on in the production process. While this is often announced to the backer audience as good news (as it

frees up developer time and resources to work mainly on development tasks), the backer community typically has conflicted feelings about a publisher coming on-board, given that the independence from publishers was a key aspect of engaging in crowdfunding. There is of course a crucial note to make: the developer who has been able to fund the bulk of the development work on their own is in a much better negotiating position with a publisher, and most likely never needs to sell the game IP or cut any creative corners because of the publisher involvement. Being able to develop and launch a game while still owning the IP is perhaps the most crucial single aspect of the crowdfunding model for the developer. In contrast to the traditional publishing logic, a developer in the crowdfunding model and a publisher who agrees to publish a crowdfunded game step into an equal partnership where the publisher assumes most of the marketing and partner-sourcing duties. However, publishers still get to influence the development process, negotiating for example which platforms are going to be supported (which, for some backers, might already be too much involvement).

Traditionally, publishers have not been interested in anything other than games that have potential mass appeal (e.g. Donovan 2010, 367). Newly emerging mid-tier publishers go after small and mid-tier games, and at the same time they are content with not owning the IP (some even advise developers never to sell their IP rights). In the wake of the retro- and indie-gaming booms, both the traditional AAA publishers and new mid-tier publishers look for interesting independent games to publish. Mid-tier publishers in particular look for crowdfunded games to release. They also help small developers to get their games financed and make use of crowdfunding as a tool, e.g. by creating a campaign together, helping with the associated marketing etc., continuing the relationship if the campaign succeeds. As such, the impact of the crowdfunding model can be felt to reverberate on lower and mid-tier levels of game publishing in healthy new ways.

Conclusions

> "[T]he games industry is not simply an example of late capitalism par excellence but rather a forerunner—a canary in the coal mine of creative work. Gameswork sits at the intersection of technologization and entrepreneurship, becoming a proving ground for early data practices, individualized modes of work, and justificatory discourses for precarity that filter through to other realms, including creative industries and beyond."
>
> (Whitson 2019)

Crowdfunding is a fairly new phenomenon where several techno-economic trends of cultural production coalesce. Similar to the role of games industries within the wider landscape of media production, games crowdfunding has been a frontrunner within the wider field of crowdfunding; a sector where many campaign strategies were first tried out and many widely used practices were popularised. Games crowdfunding is an example of a phenomenon that clearly displays characteristics that are often linked to game cultures more generally, such as platformised techno-capitalism, high-intensity viral marketing, blurring boundaries between production and consumption, and large online user cultures. At the same time, it displays characteristics that deviate from the mainstream, including niche user cultures that serve as taste-makers, a heightened emphasis on physical products, and a reluctance to fully embrace co-creative opportunities.

This dissertation has found games crowdfunding to be quite a multifaceted phenomenon in terms of methodology, theory and content. Out of the many possible research approaches to focus on, this study has chosen to look at games crowdfunding through the lenses of political economy, cultural studies-oriented audience studies, and occasionally through business studies. Out of the many possible sub-sectors to focus on, this study has centred on the organization of game production that uses crowdfunding, the roles and motivations of the backer audience in the model, and the relationship between crowdfunding and game retail.

Opening the analysis, I considered the production aspects of games crowdfunding. First, despite the idealised rhetoric about the democratizing and emancipatory potential of the model that has surrounded crowdfunding (especially during the most lucrative years of Kickstarter), games crowdfunding is in fact a lot of work. In getting rid of the traditional publisher, developers themselves need to shoulder most of the work that the publisher used to handle. This requires acquiring a lot of new competencies, such as marketing, PR, customer service, community management, partner sourcing, production management, and reward fulfilment. Compared to the early days of games crowdfunding, campaigns are now rarely about

asking funding for a game development idea. Instead, they are more and more about finishing and polishing a game project that's already well established. Second, this process of platformisation of game production through crowdfunding births a new network of intermediaries with its own political economy. This happens as developers offload excessive tasks to sub-contractors such as porting and localizing, and as they answer to the demands of this new production ecology, also tasks such as reward fulfilment and pledge management. Third, in its platformised form, crowdfunding affects the core logic of game production, manifested in the ways that Kickstarter reorganizes game production. Among other things, this is visible in how the production lifecycle is moulded to fit the cycles of pre-campaign production, campaigning, marketing, and post-campaign customer care.

Moving on to the motivations and attitudes of the backers, this dissertation has made a point of how the notion of a 'backer' is quite narrow when the multiple actions of the backer community are explored in-depth. Instead of being 'just backers', backers have several other roles in the crowdfunding ecosystem. A key observation is that backers substitute for gaps in the developer's work force in the way that they advertise, promote and spread the word about the crowdfunded games, as well as help other backers, offer feedback and test games, among other sporadic tasks. In terms of participation motivations, backers participate in games crowdfunding for a wide variety of reasons, besides just getting the final product. Some backers simply want to help worthy projects or worthy creators for altruistic reasons. Others want to be a part of the development process in specific ways – less so to affect the game content, but rather to see that everything goes as they imagined. This motivation is also manifested as a wish to spectate the development process through developer communications. This leads to the last point concerning backer motivations, where many backers now expect regular updates, regardless of whether the developers realise this or not. Through the platformisation process (the way a crowdfunding platform like Kickstarter organizes game production in certain ways, affecting the core logic of development), crowdfunding as a system coaxes developers to update regularly, offering a window into the development process. This serves as evidence of a transition in how game cultural content is consumed.

Examination of the relationship of crowdfunding and game retail informs how the role of backers is evolving. Partly through this analysis, it also provides evidence of where both games crowdfunding and game retail are heading. First, games crowdfunding is funding increasingly finished game products – due to the production logic it follows – that guides the mainstream backer community to treat crowdfunding as a form of buying or pre-ordering. Second, games crowdfunding

signifies and reflects how the culture of game retail is changing. This is a transition where, in order to lessen the risks of production, most physical game content (especially physical game boxes) is becoming a niche phenomenon that is made to order, as mainstream consumption turns towards digital content (largely because the mainstream logic of digital games is now in service-like products). Third, this change is also manifested in the ways consumers figure in the wider system of production, as games crowdfunding as a system, turns many backers into agents of retail. This links back to the broadening definition of the backer, and also to the intensifying gamification practices utilized in modern grass-roots-centric marketing, aiming to win the hearts of the core fan community by turning them into evangelists.

Drawing the three areas of production, reception and retail together: based on the findings of this study, I argue that instead of being just a funding mechanism, crowdfunding constitutes an entire production logic that affects every area of game production that happens throughout the model. Games crowdfunding reflects a wider cultural shift in media production and consumption. It is a herald of a new time where users are more tied to the production process in ways that make it difficult to tell who is able to capture value and where. Sometimes this arrangement seems to be beneficial for both production and the audience – almost an ideal situation. On the other hand, the arrangement sometimes seems like it is very exploitative of the audience, as the system places most of the monetary risk on backers' shoulders in a way that warrants a lot of critical appraisal of the capitalist logic of crowdfunding. Furthermore, sometimes this arrangement seems like it is very exploitative of the developers, who end up in a very precarious professional situation. Here, the opposing counter-part is not so much the backer communities, but more the capitalist cultural industry. This capitalist logic is perhaps best captured by the new spirit of capitalism, outlined by Whitson (2019) and Boltanski and Chiapello (2005), i.e. a cultural industry centred on small teams, characterized by a condition of precarity, with workers being expected to exchange job security familiar from the traditional game industry model for a more autonomous, creative form of labour (Whitson 2019).

As this study assumes most of its identity from game studies, and more particularly from game production studies, it is crucial to ask what the implications of this study are for both areas. First of all, this study connects to and contributes to a wider contemporary field of phenomena (including studies, documentaries and other processes) that make the processes of game creation more visible, transparent and understandable. This is both an observation on the connections that game development has to consumption, and also one made on the state of academic

research. For my part, I have drawn connections between crowdfunding and changing consumption habits where some backers are 'consuming' the development process, e.g. through updates. This is a wider process that can also be witnessed for example in the phenomenon of live-devving (live-streaming game development), itself tightly connected to DIY culture, game jamming, and the performance logic outlined by Kerr (2017).

Furthermore, this dissertation has made a case of studying game production without studying the actual games themselves. It pays to ask, what does that tell us about game studies and game production studies? We have reached a point of saturation within the core area of game studies that promotes sidestepping the games themselves in favour of looking at "what else is there to be examined besides games?". This signals a maturation of the field. In her discussion about 'paratexts', Mia Consalvo (2017) draws attention to the elements that surround a central text, "lending that central text meaning, framing and shaping how we understand it." Similarly, the production of games is an element that surrounds the central text of games, and to a varying degree, informs how we understand that text. This is especially true with crowdfunding, where the campaign and post-campaign periods before the launch of the game have a key role on how the final text is shaped and received. Being informed about the production process affects how media texts are read elsewhere too; for example, documentaries and commentary tracks on DVDs and blu-rays that explain and detail film production processes might have a clear impact on how a particular film is looked at.

This study contributes to wider media production studies in other ways, too. Based on this study, I would suggest scholars of production studies to reconsider the quality of the push-pull relationship between users and production. In games crowdfunding, backers act as agents of production and retail. The role of the backer audience emerges as an integral part of the production process and how production is organized. As such, studying production in separation from the users would appear to be a highly outdated approach in the crowdfunding context. As the significance of grass-roots fan culture and the subsequent commercial potential to exploit it rises (e.g. through influencers and viral marketing), fans become a crucial part of the complex value-laden configurations. Consequently, these configurations – both the opening opportunities and the sites of exploitation – require increased, but balanced critical scrutiny.

This study also has much to offer to crowdfunding studies. While an increasing number of academic studies have explored crowdfunding, most of these have been business studies with fewer inquiries into the cultural aspects of the phenomenon. It

is clear that in terms of emerging forms of cultural production, crowdfunding has a lot to offer for studies in the humanist and sociological traditions. This study has hopefully been able to capture the attention of any scholar interested in studying cultural production. I hope to have illustrated how crowdfunding as a newer, participatory form of cultural production emerges as a somewhat conflicted phenomenon that warrants substantial critical inquiry due to its positioning in the crossroads of such forces as crowdsourcing, DIY culture, cultural platformisation, and high-intensity capitalism. In terms of depth of analysis, this dissertation has tried to provide a wide, rounded understanding of games crowdfunding, sidestepping a deep dive into just one aspect of the phenomenon. This has been a conscious choice, as the dissertation at hand is the first wide-scale study on the cultural aspects of games crowdfunding.

As well as answering critical questions concerning games crowdfunding, this dissertation has raised some new questions. In terms of methodology, I have already alluded to some of these questions, for example whether media production in general and game production in particular should be studied in ways that would include the role of the users more prominently. From the political economy perspective, it is important to ask how crowdfunding impacts game publishing in the long run, given that we have now begun to see new kinds of more equal collaborations occur between game developers and publishers. Furthermore, what is the relationship between big-money game development and crowdfunding going forward, especially given that notable collaborations between studios using crowdfunding and large publishers (most notably Ys Net and Sony on *Shenmue III*) have not panned out in the most favourable of ways. Crowdfunding is still finding its place in relation to the surrounding industry, and it remains to be seen where it will end up. For example, will it become a tertiary function of the larger industry to monetise physical print runs and special editions, or will it find a more permanent place as a channel for realizing small but important new gameplay ideas?

Addressing the limitations of the research, this study has mainly looked at the political economy of some of the largest games crowdfunding projects. Crowdfunding projects come in all shapes and sizes. Consequently, future studies should consider the vast majority of crowdfunding campaigns, namely the small and mid-sized projects. Only by studying a much fuller variety of projects we can understand the full picture of how games crowdfunding affects and shapes the larger landscape of game funding and production. In terms of backer communities, the methodology of this study has not allowed discussing the wide variety of backers in a way that would fully highlight different kinds of backer clusters (e.g. by conducting

cluster analysis on the data), even if this was alluded to in the results about conflicting motivations between the egoistical and altruistic motivations. Future studies should explore in more detail the different games crowdfunding backer profiles with their nuanced motivations. Are there for example differences in backing behaviours between different genders? From a qualitative cultural studies perspective, the current ways of audience participation lead one to wonder what kind of various directions backers' involvement will take, and how will spectating development feature in future consumption habits? The aspect of developers' relationships with backer communities (e.g. how developers are able to navigate the pressures and demands of the crowd while maintaining a reasonable degree of independence) also warrants more research in future studies.

Finally, despite the discussion above about researching games crowdfunding while not looking at games themselves; crowdfunded games are an interesting and important topic to tackle in future academic studies. First, as certain genres are more widely represented among crowdfunded games, studying the model might reveal crowdfunding as a type of barometer in terms of what kinds of game content the larger player community craves for (for example the role of crowdfunding in the larger retro-gaming boom that resurrected 'metroidvanias', isometric computer RPGs and point'n'click adventures). Additionally, it would be important to come up with research that can assess the cultural and industrial impact of the many transgressive games produced through crowdfunding that might very well not exist without the model. Here too, a question remains as to what the long-term impact of crowdfunding is on transgressive, risqué or otherwise shunned game content.

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Double Duty: Crowdfunding and the Evolving Game Production Network

Heikki Tyni[1]

Abstract

As independent game makers strive to tackle the demands of game production without the help of a traditional publisher, a familiar game production environment has started to evolve. Adopting a game production studies perspective, this article focuses on crowdfunding as a new channel for independent game development and the shifts crowdfunding causes in the game production network. Two successfully crowdfunded case examples—*Bloodstained* (2018), a digital game, and *Conan* (2016), a board game—are used to illustrate changes crowdfunding causes in the traditional game production environment. In removing the publisher as an "unnecessary" middleman, crowdfunded productions need to take care of the many tasks that used to belong to publishers, such as marketing, partner sourcing, distribution networks, and customer relationships. As projects turn to emerging production network intermediaries, their significance—as well as that of the crowdfunding backers—provides evidence to classify the crowdfunding model as a new game production logic.

Keywords

game industry, production networks, production studies, independent games, crowdfunding

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Sidestepping the traditional role of the publisher in the game production value chain, games are now increasingly released as independent productions. This development has been accelerated mainly by the introduction of reliable digital distribution channels and the popularization of game platforms that focus exclusively on digitally distributed content (such as iOS and Android). Besides relying on self-financing, many of these independent productions seek financing through crowdfunding. In crowdfunding, a project creator sets up a project for which they seek small funding contributions from a large group of individuals via the Internet. Compared to traditional game publishing, where the publisher retains rights to the intellectual property (IP) associated with the game, crowdfunding provides developers with a seemingly ideal self-publishing channel, free from publisher influence.

The crowdfunding model has been examined predominantly in business and economic studies with focus on the possible factors behind campaign success (Mollick, 2014), determinants of backing behavior (Burtch, Ghose, & Wattal, 2014; Gerber & Hui, 2013), creator motivations (Belleflamme, Lambert, & Schwienbacher, 2014; Gerber & Hui, 2013), and the effects of location (Agrawal, Catalini, & Goldfarb, 2011), among others. The cultural phenomenon of game crowdfunding has been described in a few seminal articles (Planells, 2015; Smith, 2015), but to get deeper into the subject matter at hand, academic research now needs more specific case studies exploring the crowdfunding environment.

This article is interested in the *crowdfunding model* as an alternative production environment for games. The main aim of the article is to map out the different parties associated with traditional game production, how this production network evolves with productions using the crowdfunding model, and what kind of production logic can be applied to the crowdfunding production model. Drawing from Kerr (2017) and Johns (2006), the analysis uses the concepts of production network and production logic. The article is equally interested in how this subsector of game production relates to the growth and restructuring of the game industry over the past decade and the political economy of the crowdfunding production environment, that is, what consequences sidestepping the publisher via crowdfunding and digital distribution has for game developers. Digital distribution has been hailed as a liberator for independent game production, and popular rhetoric surrounding crowdfunding has envisioned it as the perfect tool for launching independent games. Using two successfully crowdfunded game productions—*Bloodstained* (ArtPlay & Dico, 2018) and *Conan* (Henry, 2016)—as case examples, this article seeks to problematize these assumptions in detailing the different ways in which game crowdfunding is fast becoming a laborious affair with a new set of hindrances.

The article first discusses the theoretical background of the study, after which the method and data are elaborated. Following this, the "traditional" game production network (Johns, 2006) popular during the 1990s and early 2000s is outlined. Next, the key transformations shaping the game industry since the early 2000s are outlined and the emergence of crowdfunding production model is connected to this chain. The analysis section highlights the different ways in which the production network

roles of crowdfunding are redistributed to existing and new actors. Lastly, the conclusions section discusses the implications of the findings for wider game production research.

Theoretical Background and Research Questions

The theoretical basis of this study draws from the political economy of games and the production studies approach, emerged during the last decade, that is, how cultural production is organized, how does this affect the produced cultural texts, who controls power and money within each system of production, and how do these factors reflect on the cultural work force and the player communities (Kerr, 2017). During the first decade of the 2000s, critical analysis following this tradition was largely focused on the political economy of the traditional game industry and the biggest blockbuster games (Dyer-Witheford & de Peuter, 2009; Dymek, 2010; Kerr, 2006; Kline, Dyer-Witheford, & de Peuter, 2003; Nieborg, 2011), with focus on the centrality of platform owners and publishers as industry power brokers and on the ways developers were exploited in that production model. Since then, the introduction of digital distribution and the proliferation of mobile platforms have expanded and changed the game industry significantly. Research on the political economy of games has turned to mobile games as the most lucrative industry sector (Nieborg, 2016), while independent game production has grown significantly in numbers. While previous research focused mainly on the publisher/developer relationship, new axes have emerged, "including the developer/platform relationship, the developer/investor relationship and the developer/player relationship" (Kerr, 2017, p. 92). Emerging studies have concentrated on more nuanced matters, using, for example, industry ethnographies to detail how specific production context and larger game industry transformations affect and shape the everyday work of regular employees (Jørgensen, 2017; O'Donnell, 2014) and game design (de Smale, Kors, & Sandovar, 2017). Kerr (2011) argues that:

> "[t]o understand the culture of gamework we need to pay attention to the range of actors (human and non-human) in game production networks, the differences in power between these actors and the experiences of workers both within the development companies and those external actors they engage with. Increasingly game production networks flow beyond firm boundaries and certain functions are outsourced (e.g., human resources, middleware, testing, marketing, community support, content creation). Little is known about the relationships generated and how they are managed" (p. 225).

The most important of recent studies on the evolving game production environment, *Global Games* (Kerr, 2017), provides effective tools for the structural analysis of current and emerging game production models. Building on the works of Bernard Miège, Jean-Guy Lacroix, and Gaëtan Tremblay, Kerr utilizes the lens of production

logic to illustrate and identify "the key market and institutional characteristics structuring different types of game production," focusing on the high-level market conditions surrounding and shaping production (Kerr, 2017, p. 78). Further, she uses the lens of production network to give a nuanced understanding on what kind of network of actors typically runs a particular production logic and to highlight how value is created and who can capture this value (Kerr, 2017, p. 79). Through production networks, it is easier to understand at which point of the production lifecycle of game production different parties enter. While a production lifecycle was relatively simple in traditional publishing logic, it has evolved a lot, for example, with the emergence of service-based gaming, new determinants for project success, and new sources of project financing (Kerr, 2017, p. 87).

One of the new forms of financing is crowdfunding, increasingly used with independent game production. While there is an increasing body of critical cultural research on the state of independent game production (see, e.g., Lipkin, 2013; Whitson, 2013), there are few critical studies that go deeper into crowdfunding as a production context for games. Picking up where Kerr (2017) left off, this study aims to illustrate the crowdfunding model as a new, branching production logic by exploring the production networks used with game crowdfunding. The aim here is to detail how game production in the crowdfunding model is organized around the central brokers, the economic chain, and marketing concerns. Thus, the theoretical contribution of this study is to highlight the political economy of this particular game production model, that is, the connections around the case crowdfunding campaigns, this way giving a better understanding of the related subsectoral industry structure, any emerging centers of power and who control that power, and possible instances of exploitation of work force or audience.

As these pressures reflect on the crowdfunding work environment, the article also connects to the increasing body of research concerned with media labor in the current network society, that is, the evolving conditions and demands media workers find themselves dealing with. Baym (2015) describes how many artists working in creative industries are now required to engage in unsalaried social labor, meaning "regular, ongoing communication with audiences over time to build social relationships that foster paid work." This kind of extra labor is now very much a demand also among independent game productions wishing to get noticed in a market based on social networks.

Method and Data

The main method of analysis adopts the concepts of production logic and production network (Kerr, 2017) to map out the rationale of the crowdfunding production environment. Kerr (2017) defines production logics as a "relatively stable set of institutional relationships generated by the commodification of cultural production" (p. 15). Singling out *general characteristics*, *the central brokers*, *the economic chain/network*, *creative professions*, *sales and revenue*, and *market characteristics*,

she identifies five main logics of cultural production within the current digital game industry (2017, pp. 68–74):

- *Publishing logic*—the classic game publishing logic, still mainly used with triple-A game production;
- *Flow logic*—a flow of content updates to keep players engaged, for example, subscription-based massively multiplayer online-games (MMOGs);
- *Club logic*—a continuous service with an "all-you-can-play" catalogue of content, based, for example, on monthly subscription;
- *Performance logic*—regular live events with performing gameplay to an audience as a source of revenue, for example, through YouTube and Twitch or in tournaments;
- *Platform logic*—based on the central position of Internet intermediaries, with equal importance placed on mobile devices, the continuous flow of data, algorithms, and the free-to-play business model. Fast becoming the generic logic of the global game industry.

These logics are interweaving and influence each other, and Kerr (2017) implies that the emerging production models can be explained with these logics or at least by combining elements from them (pp. 68, 78). Accordingly, in this article, the crowdfunding model is examined as an emerging production logic that shares attributes with existing logics. Analysis details the production network of the crowdfunding model through two case games, detailing the relevant actors in the crowdfunding production logic and the dynamics between them. Crowdfunding gives indie development more structure compared to earlier, more free-form production. This more structured and transparent model with regular production updates offers research a new window on the intermediaries and the highs and lows of the production process as they happen. Examining the wider organization of companies, suppliers, and "others who work to deliver a game" helps in understanding (1) who are the central brokers "setting the terms and conditions" for others to follow and (2) why production is organized in a certain way, as dictated by the funding sources, the marketing environment, and the central brokers (Kerr, 2017, pp. 79, 81). As the crowdfunding model has been discussed using emancipatory rhetoric (Planells, 2015), it is important to gain a critical understanding of who is able to capture value in it. The concept of the production lifecycle is also given attention, as it helps to situate the different actors in a network and provides the examination with a chronological structure, that is, what game productions need to do in each phase.

The analysis is illustrated with evidence from two example cases, *Bloodstained: Ritual of the Night*, a digital game, and *Conan*, a board game. Scheduled to release in 2018, *Bloodstained: Ritual of the Night* is a side-scrolling action adventure game. The crowdfunding campaign for *Bloodstained* was successfully completed in June 2015 with US$5,545,991 in pledges, then a record for digital games. It is set to release on all current generation game consoles. *Bloodstained* was conceived by the

Japanese game developer Koji Igarashi who, having produced some of the most memorable installments in the long running *Castlevania* series (Konami, 1986), left Konami to create a spiritual *Castlevania* sequel of his own, affectively dubbed as an '*Igavania*'. *Conan*, designed by French game designer Frédéric Henry and published by his company Monolith, is a miniature board game based on the fantasy character Conan the Barbarian by Robert E. Howard. The game is played with highly detailed 30-mm miniatures evoking classic fantasy board games such as *HeroQuest* (Baker & Games Workshop, 1989). Crowdfunding campaign for *Conan* ended on February 12, 2015, and gathered US$3,327,467 in pledges, then a record for board games.

Examining these games as case studies allows the data to consist of a "full variety of evidence" that can be combined with other data sets in flexible ways (Yin, 2009). With these example cases, this meant campaign and marketing material, update and announcement texts, interviews given to media, material on various social media including text and videos, and two-way communication on both the official campaign comments section and on popular hobbyist forums. Data were collected by the author during and after the campaigns in spring and summer 2015, but the observation continues until the expected release of *Bloodstained*. I was a backer on both campaigns, close reading the campaign sites, updates, and other messaging on social media. I read most of the messaging on the official campaign comments section, paying attention particularly to any criticism by the users and the ways developers addressed these criticisms and other concerns. With *Conan*, I also followed the forums on the board gaming site Boardgamegeek.com, widely regarded as the most significant board gaming hobbyist site.

The two games were chosen as example cases for multiple reasons. First, I started to follow *Conan* by chance when the campaign had run for a few days. I backed the project to experience and observe firsthand the kind of high-profile campaign it seemed to evolve in to. I backed *Bloodstained* as I assumed it would come loaded with history and expectations from the fan community following its resemblance to the *Castlevania* games. Additionally, the campaign displayed captivating characteristics, for example, in gamifying the campaign marketing. Further, as both campaigns ended up having large and highly successful campaigns, they seemed to become large productions with a lot of intermediaries, highlighting the associated production networks.

The examination is limited to the high-profile forms of crowdfunding, that is, the largest platform for creative projects, Kickstarter, and two highly successful projects. Further, as Kickstarter supports only reward-based crowdfunding, other forms of crowdfunding such as patronage, loan, and equity crowdfunding (see Mollick, 2014) are excluded from this study.

From Traditional Production Networks to Crowdfunding

From the 1980s up until the turn of the millennium, the game production network was largely based on the incremental value chain (Kline et al., 2003), comprised of

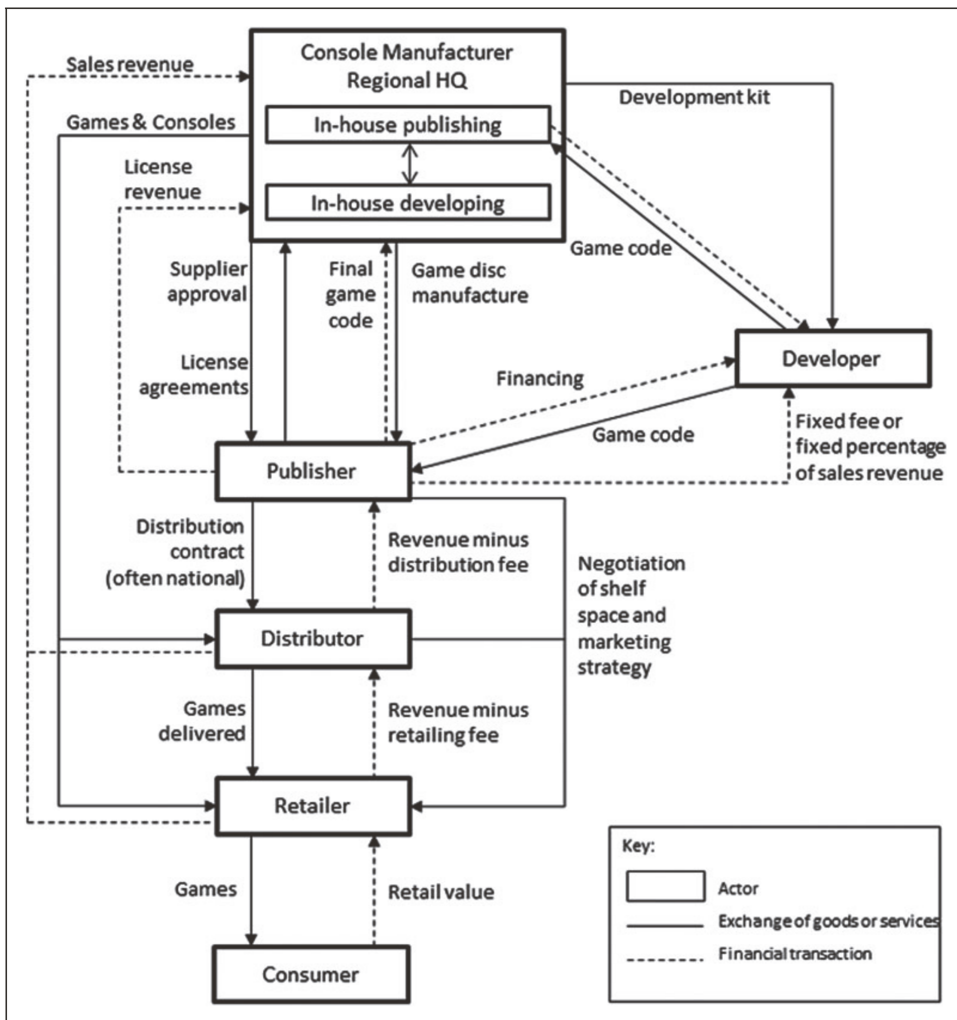

Figure 1. Interconnections between actors in the digital game production network (Johns, 2006).

platform holders, publishers, developers, distributors, and retailers (Johns, 2006). A given production network might have also included such additional parties as venture capitalists and government agencies providing prototype funding (Kerr, 2006, p. 83). Of the video game retail value, the platform holder received 20%, the developer and publisher 40% (combined), the distributor 10%, and the retailer 30% (Johns, 2006). Additionally, monetary connections tied the value chain parties together on different levels; the publisher, for example, also paid licensing fees to the platform holders, and the different parties jointly monetized marketing efforts (Johns, 2006). Figure 1 showcases these interconnections within the production network.

The traditional production model is still largely in place for the biggest blockbusters, the so-called triple-A games, with the publisher as a central broker—or a "value chain governor"—supervising production areas and controlling financing (Deuze, 2007; Nieborg, 2011). Publishers typically control projects' core activities, while noncore services are outsourced (Grantham & Kaplinsky, 2005, p. 199). As the publisher takes both the highest risk and the highest reward, its operating logic is dictated by the need to create sustainability (Kline et al., 2003). One solution to this has been constant increases in marketing expenditures: the largest publishers (EA, Activision, and Ubisoft) direct roughly 50% of their revenue into marketing (Zackariasson & Wilson, 2012, p. 65). Many *AAA-games* have equal-sized marketing and development budgets (Kotaku, 2014), with the largest productions spending considerably more (Takahashi, 2009). Another strategy is vertical and horizontal industry integration which is used to increase control over the value chain and IP rights.

Publishers habitually demand the IP rights as a prerequisite for financing a game (Nieborg, 2011). In most cases, the developer needs to showcase an advanced prototype of the game to secure a publishing deal; this has often resulted in the developer self-financing a prototype with a debt (Kerr, 2006, p. 81), then becoming obligated to agree to publisher's terms in order to secure financing that can be used to payback that debt and start developing the game. In this traditional model, the profit share for the developer has remained around 10%.

Since the turn of the millennium, the most notable techno-economic transitions shaping the game industry have been the introduction of online connected game consoles, digital distribution of games, and the proliferation of game platforms. The largest revenues are now achieved in mobile instead of consoles (SuperData Research, 2015). Digital distribution platforms such as Valve's Steam have helped introduce easy, reliable, and fast plug-and-play gaming to increasingly wide audiences. Online connected consoles have allowed publishers to extend games through downloadable add-on content (Nieborg, 2014) and to maintain a continued service relationship with the player (Stenros & Sotamaa, 2009), feeding them new content and promotions.

The service model has allowed publishers even more dominance over the value chain: Digital distribution entirely sidesteps retail stores and physical distribution channels. Further, the material costs for manufacturing games are significantly lower. On the other hand, digital distribution has allowed developers to directly negotiate deals with platform holders, removing also the need for a publisher from the production chain (Sotamaa, Tyni, Toivonen, Malinen, & Rautio, 2011). Thus, it would seem that digital distribution offers a more streamlined, efficient, and direct model for selling digital games (see Figure 2 for a streamlined production network).

This new environment has helped the proliferation of independent game production. Due to the popularity of mobile platforms, small games created by teams of one to five people have the same kind of opportunity to become hits as *AAA-games*. With digital distribution, developers can receive up to 70% of the sales profits themselves (Sotamaa et al., 2011). For a developer, smaller games are easier to produce without

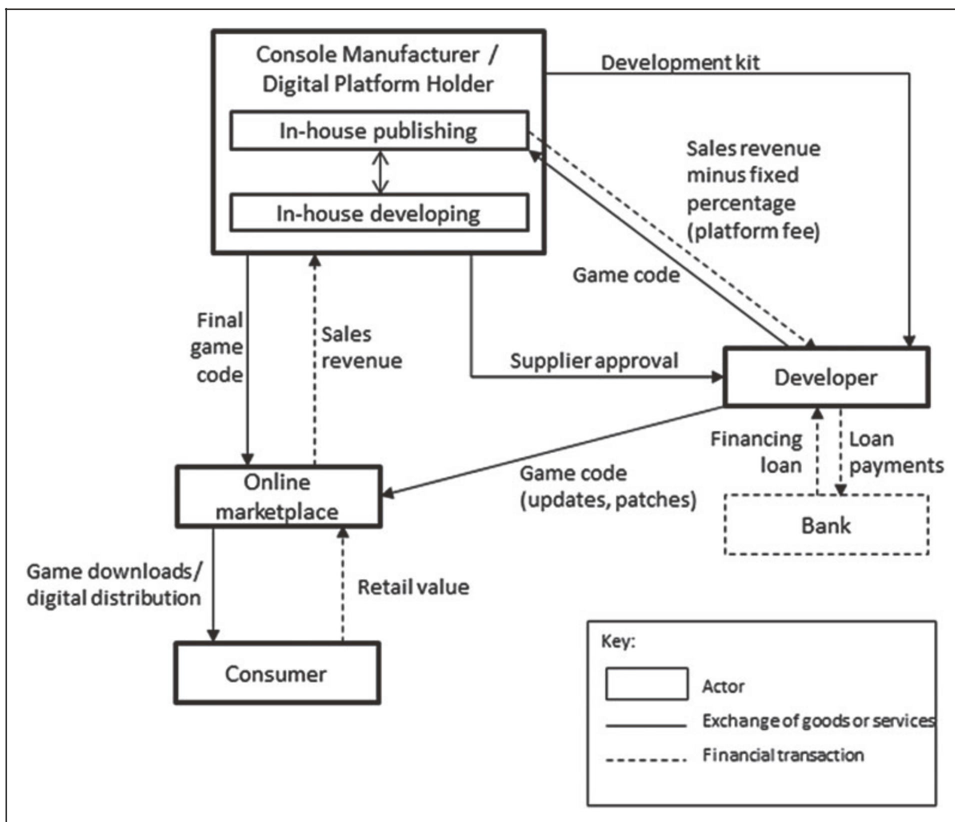

Figure 2. Streamlined production network for digital distribution.

incurring debt. While cultivating these niche audiences on a global scale can become lucrative business (Kline et al., 2003, p. 64), large publishers tend to look for the largest possible profit margins. Thus, one of the open possibilities for smaller developers has been to identify and address emerging niche audiences.

Toward Crowdsourced and Crowdfunded Production Logics

Current independent game publishing is largely concentrated on digital PC storefronts and mobile app stores. Because of their popularity, it is hard to get noticed on these platforms without promotional resources. One solution offered by Valve has been the creation of Steam Greenlight, a crowdsourcing platform used for peer-vetting user-created game concepts.

Crowdfunding platforms take this voting to its logical conclusion: Users donate money upfront to microfund promising game concepts. In crowdfunding, a project creator sets up a project for which they seek small funding contributions from a large group of individuals via the Internet. The project creator typically creates a pitch

video in which they describe the game they would like to make, the skills and assets that prove they can actually execute the plan, and possible concept art, alpha footage, or a prototype of the early version of the game. Funding is based on a tiered system: smallest steps, roughly US$10–20, typically yield a digital download of the game when it is completed, while higher tiers offer soundtracks, collector's editions, signed artwork, and so on. Project creators keep everything they receive on top of their minimum goal, with gradually rising "stretch goals" used in describing how the project will use any extra funds.

The crowdfunding model provides developers with a financing channel that is seemingly free from publisher influence. In contrast to the traditional publishing model, where the publisher has typically kept developers and players far apart (Kerr, 2017, p. 71), many developers use crowdfunding as a means to address the gaming audience directly, asking gamers whether they would like to see the proposed game. As such, crowdfunding platforms are ideal channels for identifying and addressing niche game audiences. They have quickly become popular with game productions. Game crowdfunding has shown signs of plateauing in terms of money pledged, but the number of game projects seeking crowdfunding is increasing: In 2013, 4,000 game projects were proposed on Kickstarter, while in 2016, the number was nearly 7,000 (Bidaux, 2017). Consequently, it has become difficult to get noticed by the players and specialized media. Projects need to allocate more and more resources for an advanced working prototype, a high-quality campaign video, marketing, and public relations.

With crowdfunding and crowdsourcing platforms, the production of independent games has quickly moved toward a model that relies primarily on network markets (cf. Hartley, 2009), whether it is for getting visibility or funding. One consequence of such an environment is that developers now need to showcase a presentable prototype very early in the process in order to get a game published, not to secure a deal with a publisher, but to pre-sell the game to a large enough pool of individual funders, the "crowd." Financing a prototype might necessitate independent developers to seek other funding even before the crowdfunding period, while other marketing demands—before and during the funding period—front-load crowdfunded productions even further.

Analysis: Rediscovering Production Network Roles

A general challenge for smaller, independent game developers is the need to take care of every aspect of the production on their own. At the same time, crowdfunding campaigns have become increasingly professional in their quality, utilizing a wide variety of marketing tactics. As such, independent game creators both need to take a financial risk in creating a prototype while also needing to prepare an impressive funding campaign, employing skills not traditionally associated with game development.

The following analysis focuses on the production lifecycle of two example games, *Bloodstained* and *Conan*, paying special attention to the different production network roles. The analysis is divided into sections concentrating on different areas of production, in loose chronological order. A special emphasis is placed on marketing resulting from its central role in the game industry in general (Marchand & Hennig-Thurau, 2013; Zackariasson & Wilson, 2012) and in the crowdfunding model in specific, explained above.

Coordination and Precampaign Marketing

Crowdfunding campaigns tend to follow a U-curve where the first and the last few days of the campaign are the most active and lucrative (Kuppuswamy & Bayus, 2015). Precampaign marketing aims to build up the best possible start for a crowdfunding campaign. Creators need to start building anticipation and awareness of the upcoming game well in advance. Hui, Gerber, and Greenberg (2012) concluded that campaign creators usually took 1–3 months to analyze the model for various opportunities and 3–6 months to prepare campaign materials. The most common explanation for failure given by unsuccessful project creators is that their marketing was inadequate (Mollick & Kuppuswamy, 2014).

A closer look at the two projects reveals careful coordination behind their crowdfunding campaigns and subsequent production. The *Conan* campaign site listed 46 names involved in the project. *Bloodstained* was described as a "collaboration between dozens of people across a variety of companies," with the campaign site introducing key people, guest artists, and different "departments" such as "PR," "pitch video," and "development." Throughout the *Bloodstained* campaign, an important partner for Igarashi was his translator and agent Ben Judd (representing his company Digital Development Management [DDM]). Judd accompanied Igarashi for all his public appearances, often speaking for the relatively quiet Igarashi, adding to the translations and promoting the game. The campaign page listed "coordination" and "partner sourcing" as DDM's responsibility, while Judd called himself "campaign producer" (McDaniel, 2015). DDM secured most of the partners associated with the project, including the actual development studio, Inti Creates. Judd had earlier produced the very successful Kickstarter campaign of *Mighty No. 9* (2016), another Japanese game based on a nostalgic genre.

The existence of *Bloodstained* was first teased in the fall 2014 *PAX game* conference with an unexplained "There Will Be Blood" flyer, including runic writing that fans later deciphered as: "What a wonderful night to have a KS." Later, during spring 2015, a site called Swordorwhip.com appeared online featuring a caricature Igarashi sitting on a throne dressed as a vampire and asking "Sword or whip?" (both classic *Castlevania* weapon alternatives). Both answers prompted a request to "come back later," with other hints of an upcoming event starting to appear in the answers a week before the campaign. Igarashi and Judd started to make public appearances a

few weeks prior to the campaign, and final confirmation of the project was given on the day of the campaign launch.

The main video displayed on the campaign page is one of the most important elements of a crowdfunding campaign (Mollick, 2014). Kickstarter itself reports that "projects that have compelling videos tend to succeed at a much higher rate" (https://www.kickstarter.com/help/faq/creator+questions). The main video for the *Bloodstained* campaign was handled by an independent video production studio called 2 Player Productions. The video, shot in a resort that resembles a gothic castle, featured Igarashi asking for funding for a spiritual sequel for the *Castlevania* games, while enacting scenes from his most famous games, eventually even turning into a bat. An independent merchandising company, Fangamer, was hired to handle most areas directly connected to PR and designing and running the Kickstarter campaign. The company also designed the merchandise mock-ups available on different reward tiers, the campaign page with a retro game style castle that evolved as the campaign went along, and Swordorwhip.com.

While a massively successful crowdfunding campaign no doubt acts as great promotion for an upcoming game, some developers are using the model more to prove that there is demand for a game, with additional funding coming from elsewhere (Fahey, 2014; Handrahan, 2015). This was true also with *Bloodstained*: Igarashi announced that the main reason for the campaign was to convince an undisclosed investor party who would provide main part of the funding in case the campaign was a success (the minimum requested by the campaign, US$500,000, was reported to be 10% of the complete funding; Nutt, 2015).

Marketing During and After the Campaign

In game crowdfunding, the public typically sees the game prototype for the first time when the campaign site goes live, meaning that the hardest marketing push starts from there. In supporting the campaign, projects typically use varying strategies to maintain interest, for example, regular updates and reveals and different kinds of viral marketing. Among other variables, frequent project updates are associated with greater campaign success (Mollick, 2014). Crowdfunding platforms highly encourage projects to engaging social media during and around the campaign (see, e.g., https://www.rockethub.com/education/faq#use-social-media). During the *Bloodstained* campaign, major social media channels including YouTube, Facebook, Twitter, Tumblr, Instagram, Twitch, and Vine were used to great effect. Besides backer updates, communication happened via Facebook, Twitter, weekly "Ask IGA" YouTube videos, and other channels. Igarashi and Judd gave interviews to gaming sites and toured several gaming shows and podcasts to market the game. Reddit was used for a live "ask me anything" session with Igarashi.

Bloodstained marketing and other processes were delegated also to funders through gamifying campaign activity. Gamification with a badge system, for example, has been shown to have a clear positive effect on user activity within a peer-to-

peer system (Hamari, 2015). Fangamer used social media to gamify the campaign by creating special backer community “achievements” for the campaign. For example, the community could earn achievements when different social media channels achieved a certain number of followers and when enough fan art was posted online. A set number of achievements would then yield bonuses for the campaign, such as wallpapers and reveals of upcoming stretch goals. During the 4-hr campaign, ending live stream fans could make Igarashi shout classic lines from his games by tweeting them enough times and make him try to enact action moves from his games should the live stream become popular enough. Almost all of the achievements were unlocked, and the strategy no doubt worked to great effect both in harnessing the fan community to spread the word (i.e., viral marketing) and in getting fans enthusiastic and engaged with the campaign.

Fan participation with the campaign worked also in other ways. During the *Conan* campaign, funders had endless questions about issues such as shipping, details about payment, and release dates. This soon resulted in existing backers addressing many of the questions for newcomers, substituting for Monolith’s community manager when he was not available. Backers also openly discussed whether to spend more money on the project or “up their pledge.” As all spending on the campaign works toward a larger game, benefiting all the funders, it is interesting to consider whether backers this way enticed each other to spend more money, resulting in herding behavior (see, e.g., Agrawal, Catalini, & Goldfarb, 2014). It is nevertheless clear that funders embrace crowdfunding projects as something more than a spectator: Everybody involved is a stakeholder, whether it is about spending more money, enticing others to do so, or creating a more welcoming community for new funders.

To promote the *Conan* campaign, Monolith partnered with a few key partners. For its campaign video, Monolith used art assets from the massively multiplayer online role-playing game (MMORPG) *Age of Conan* (Funcom, 2012), both games having been licensed by Paradox Entertainment. One stretch goal also included a cross-promotion with *Age of Conan*, where *Conan* backers would receive exclusive content to use in the MMORPG. Monolith also collaborated with CMON Limited, another board game publisher behind a string of successfully funded Kickstarter games, to create a shared scenario between *Conan* and *Blood Rage* (Lang, 2015) with the ability to mix miniatures between the two games. Further, Monolith also collaborated with a (then in-development) pen-and-paper role-playing game, *Conan: Adventures in an Age Undreamed Of* (Modiphius Entertainment, 2017), allowing players to use *Conan* miniatures in role-playing scenarios.

Funding and Payments

In addition to paying possible fees to a gaming platform holder, crowdfunding projects need to pay fees to the crowdfunding platform. Kickstarter charges only successful projects—projects that meet their minimum goal—taking a flat fee of 5% of the total funds collected. In the case of *Bloodstained*, the final Kickstarter fee was

US$277,300, while Monolith paid US$166,373 for *Conan*. Kickstarter projects also pay a third party for payment transaction handling. Currently, this is handled by Stripe, whose fee varies by country and is between 3% and 5% of the total funding amount. Both *Bloodstained* and *Conan* were registered in the United States, where Stripe takes 3% of each pledge plus US$0.20 per pledge.

The *Bloodstained* campaign also offered PayPal as an alternative payment option during the campaign. The final Kickstarter funding amount does not include funds pledged through PayPal, totaling over US$213,000. PayPal charges a fee based on the customer's country of origin; for *Bloodstained*, the fee was 2.9–3.9% + US$0.30 per pledge. Late backers could use PayPal also after the campaign: The so-called slacker backer option was available through PayPal on Fangamer.com, the partner site who handled the *Bloodstained* campaign. Finally, projects with several possible reward tiers typically offer funders an opportunity to manage their pledge after the campaign, for example, upgrading their reward tier to a more expensive one. Managing pledges with tens of thousands of funders this way might mean significant logistical challenges; thus, many large projects now pay an outside party for handling this part of the process. Postcampaign pledge management for *Conan* was handed to Fluent.com, while pledge management for *Bloodstained* was handled by Fangamer using their own software. O'Donnell (2014) has described how new game industry professions are often born to "fracture lines." The emergence of pledge management services, for one, reflects the evolution of the crowdfunding model into a system with a value chain of its own.

In the traditional game production model, the publisher handles most of the money issues using its established channels, but in the crowdfunding model, the project creators need to create and maintain connections to multiple outside parties. Both projects needed to negotiate deals with several subcontractors, both out of necessity and convenience. To create a Kickstarter project for the U.S. platform, the project creator needs to have a U.S. address. While Igarashi used Fangamer for this, Monolith had to use another board game company, Days of Wonder, as a proxy. This arrangement was not enough, however, and to gain access to the successfully collected funds Monolith was eventually forced to set up a side office in the United States, with their production and delivery date delayed for half a year as a result.

Furthermore, while in the traditional production environment development studios operate primarily in a business-to-business environment (selling goods and services to the publisher), in the crowdfunding model the project creators are also in a direct relationship with the final customers: managing funds and refunds, solving problems related to failed transactions and means of payment, and so on. As a show of building trust, Monolith offered an extended 2-month refund period for the *Conan* backers after the campaign. While this would have been enough of a task to deal with, the production faced delays; assuring disgruntled funders and trying to maintain positive atmosphere amid production delays proved to be a continuous task for the company. Other problems included having to try to work out payment options for many of the Greek funders who, as a result of the Greek banking crisis, could not

pay with credit cards, instead pleading for an option to pay with PayPal. With *Bloodstained*, on the other hand, customer and payment support in its entirety was outsourced to Fangamer.

Development

To make the projects possible, both game projects had to assemble a team of development professionals, either to directly work under them or to use as subcontractors. Already during the campaign phase, it was announced that Igarashi was employed by a mobile game company called ArtPlay and now heading its Japanese branch with *Bloodstained* development as their main focus. While Igarashi, through ArtPlay, was the producer of the project and a figurehead for the *Bloodstained* project, another Japanese development studio, Inti Creates, was hired to do the main part of the development process. Further, while the studio handled the development of the game for PC, PS4, and Xbox One, the project expanded significantly during the campaign: Wii U and PSVita ports were added through stretch goals. As a result, yet another studio, Armature, was contracted to develop them. In fall 2016, two more game studios, DICO and Monobit, were brought on to replace Inti Creates, as it lacked the necessary special skills Igarashi wanted. A company called Playism handled the campaign website translations and game text localization and also hosted marketing podcasts for the project.

Several content creators were brought in as highlighted collaborators during the campaign, many having ties either to *Castlevania* or Konami, including veteran *Castlevania* artists Ayami Kojima and Yoshitaka Amano and the regular *Castlevania* composer Michiru Yamane. Voice work was handed to a studio called Rocketsound, with renowned voice artists (from Konami's past games) David Hayter and Robbie Belgrade to star in the game. These collaborators were revealed one by one during the campaign, this way evenly distributing the marketing value associated with them.

During the *Bloodstained* campaign, funders too had opportunities to influence the final design of the game—for a price. Fans could, for example, have themselves appear as portraits in the castle, make voice artists record them messages that would be hidden in the game code, have their pet turned into an in-game enemy, and even design a weapon or a secret room in the game, with cost ranging from US$750 to US$8,500. Altogether, 183 single rewards included some kind of opportunity to contribute to the in-game content, with almost all of them taken.

The main part of *Conan's* development was handled by Monolith, in Paris, France. Besides its own designers, artists, and sculptors, Monolith used a number of outside designers as subcontractors to create character art and sculpt miniature models. Among several freelancer designers, there were also highlighted visiting artists that contributed to different parts of the design process, including "Artist Boxes" with alternate character designs and three larger expansions for the game. Additional character art and models were also supplied by Funcom, with Monolith

effectively reusing assets from *Age of Conan* MMORPG. Furthermore, Monolith chose to offer backers a digital companion app as one of their last stretch goals, something outside their core competency area in board games.

Conan too delegated a portion of the development process to the backers. During the campaign, it was announced that Monolith would create an online portal where players could produce their own play scenarios and campaigns. A prototype version of the game was sent to board gaming clubs around the world; in return, each club would make a custom scenario for Monolith's online portal in time for the game's launch. Because Monolith advertised the online service—specifically, the vast number of additional scenarios—as a part of the complete experience, fans directly participated in *Conan*'s creation, similar to how modding communities are welcomed into cocreating digital games (see, e.g., Banks, 2013). A print-and-play prototype of the game was also released during the campaign with the encouragement that any "bugs" in the design would be reported back to Monolith. This way, the backer community acted as a final gameplay stress test for the game.

While previous research has seen fit to draw clear boundaries between crowdsourced work and crowdfunding (e.g., Brabham, 2013; Hui, Gerber, & Greenberg, 2012), it is evident that the line between the two is liable to become increasingly blurred. Both *Conan* and *Bloodstained* employed a strategy of utilizing supporters as work force, *Bloodstained* more with marketing and *Conan* primarily with development efforts. Banks and Humphreys (2008) have argued that this kind of value-adding labor by user cocreators forms new kinds of "hybrid relations that cut across the commercial and noncommercial social networks and markets" and that while "messy," these "new formations hold a wide range of benefits and value." The multifaceted contributions of crowdfunding backers are clearly worth a lot and can be seen tightly intertwining with the actual monetary contributions for the campaign.

Manufacturing and Distribution

Resulting from a structure based on gradually increasing stretch goals, massively successful crowdfunding campaigns can result in significantly expanded projects. As with development, both *Conan* and *Bloodstained* also needed to select and collaborate with several partners in various stages of production. Studies have reported that crowdfunding campaign creators are often overwhelmed by executing and delivering a product on a much larger scale compared to their prior experience and as a result have turned to outsourced help (Agrawal et al., 2014; Hui et al., 2012). During the final days of the *Conan* campaign, Monolith struggled to keep up with the fast campaign progress; new stretch goal characters, for example, were announced without concept art.

A constant source of worry for the backers during and after the *Conan* campaign was the quality of figurine production. Because of the varying quality of the contractors, choosing production partners from China is challenging for both start-ups and veteran developers. Monolith partnered with Dust Studios (headed by one of the

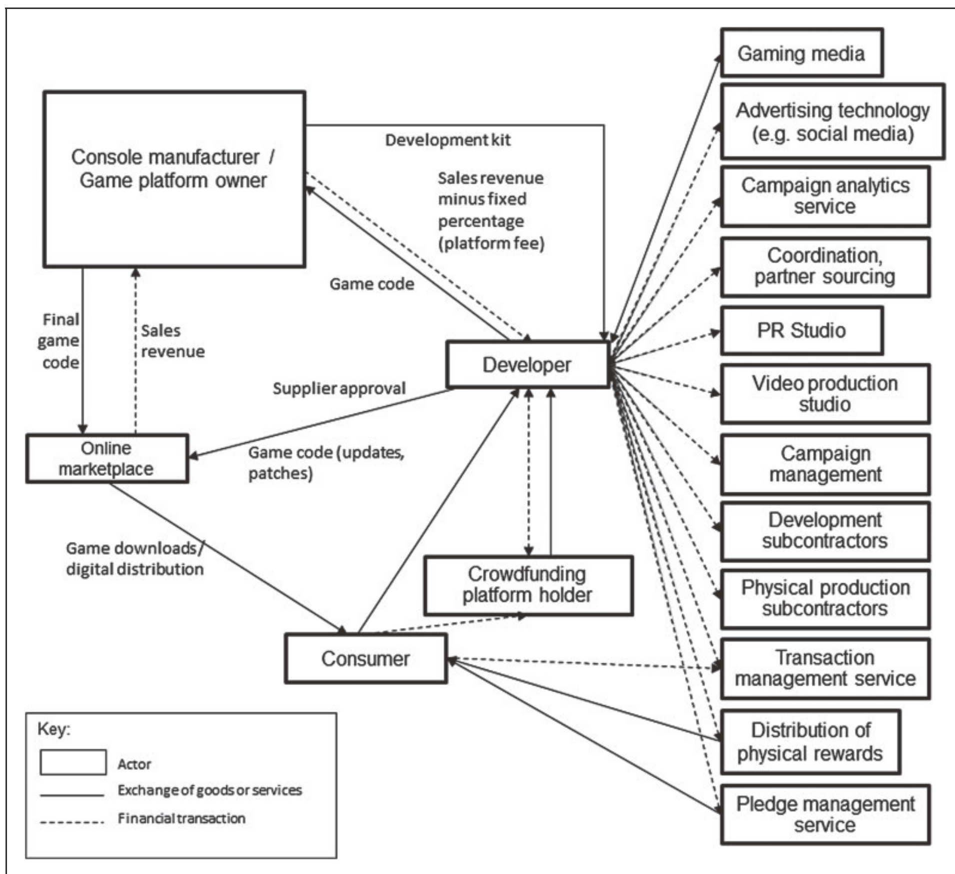

Figure 3. Example production network in the crowdfunding model.

visiting artists on the project) to handle transporting the sculpt designs into mass production. *Conan* miniatures were manufactured in China by the same manufacturer Dust Studios had previously used for their own projects. Even this could not prevent further delays in the production process: mainly due to Chinese New Year period the delivery of the figurines was eventually delayed for another 6 months.

Information regarding how much Monolith would have to charge for shipping *Conan* changed a few times, causing anguish among the backers. Veteran backers already knew that distribution is often expensive, but many were still disappointed to find out that shipping for some territories exceeded US$50. While digital games can be distributed in digital-only form, many projects include physical rewards, especially on the higher funding tiers. Among other rewards, the *Bloodstained* campaign offered a physical game box, a soundtrack CD, a retro strategy booklet, an art book, and an XL-sized physical map, along with the more traditional T-shirts, posters, and lapel pins. Fangamer handled the physical rewards using their established

Table 1. Example Logics of Cultural Production in Game Industry Compared With the Crowdfunding Model.

Characteristics	Publishing	Platform	Crowdfunding
General	One-off cultural commodities, impulse purchases	Continuous flow of user data, professional and amateur created content, content personalization and adaptation	Prepublication grassroots market, a semi-live service and semi-continuous flow of content during campaign, one-off cultural commodities, impulse purchases, collecting funding before the product has been created, maintaining a regular service after the campaign
Central broker	Publishers, platforms/ publishers	Platform intermediaries/ developers/ publishers	Platform intermediaries, developers, backers
Economic chain/ network	Project-by-project basis, irregular work, royalties, and copyright	Project-by-project basis, programmers, engineers, data analysts, customer relations and support Wage and freelance labor but also amateurs	Project-by-project basis, freelance and amateur labor; customer relations
Creative professions	Authors, composers, directors, artists, and specialized technicians	Designers, artists, engineers, network support, marketing, data analysts, community managers, game designers, players	Designers, programmers, artists, marketing, logistics personnel, community managers, players
Sales and revenue	Direct, product by product, premium	Indirect—freemium advertising, data. Some direct—downloadable content, microtransactions	Direct—prelaunch sales, product by product, pledges in tiered options; product to be delivered later; major part of profit from postlaunch sales
Market characteristics	Segmented mass market, catalogue	Niche, fragmented, personalized	Niche market, some personalization

Note. Adapted from Kerr (2017).

connections to commission the manufacturing and shipping for different subcontractors. Finally, as a digital game scheduled also for a physical release, *Bloodstained* needed to pay the console platform holders for producing physical copies of the game.

Results Summary: Crowdfunding as a Branching Production Logic

Looking at the production networks of the example games, we can see that in wanting to remove the publisher from the network, the developers need to shoulder many new responsibilities previously associated with the publisher. O'Donnell (2014) describes how shifting requirements in the game industry have necessitated reorganizing the production structure through creating new industry professions. Instead of getting rid of the roles formerly associated with the publisher, the roles were redistributed (in some cases in fragmented form) to existing and new parties in the production network. The need for marketing has risen all the time, and evidence from the example cases suggests that independent game development projects become increasingly front-loaded with preparation work. Much of this work falls outside of the traditional core competency of game developers.

Both example projects needed to secure a lot of intermediary connections; Igarashi even hired a company to coordinate them. Figure 3 showcases the emerging production network actors involved with the crowdfunding model. The example campaigns were successful because the developers adopted a decidedly "publisherly" role, both out of necessity and as a strategy. Additionally, the crowdfunding platform emerges as a "neutral" central broker—comparable to a social network platform—which nevertheless dictates the rules, sets the marketing stage, and has significant control over visibility.

When we turn to the concept of production logics and place the crowdfunding model next to its closest comparison points, the classic publishing and flow logics (see Table 1), we can see that it is mainly a combination of classic publishing logic mixed with the more modern tendencies of platform logic. The unusually strong top heaviness of the production project illustrates some of the more general tendencies of current game production, that is, a strong emphasis on marketing and what it demands. However, there are also characteristics separate from the existing logics, mainly the role of customers/backers as central brokers. They must be negotiated with, at least in the campaign phase.

Discussion and Conclusions

Through two example cases, this study has highlighted the position of the independent game developer in the larger production network. Game crowdfunding is a highly competitive area that lies at the crossroads of marketing, game development, and grassroots user engagement. As a result of resorting to crowdfunding, game

studios need to engage in several kinds of production efforts that lie outside of the traditional core of game development. This means both learning new skills—often on-the-go—and having to spend increasing amounts of time on tasks like PR, customer service, and negotiating with manufacturing partners. This, in turn, has led to a need to resort to external help, for example, to handle campaign logistics or hiring new community management personnel. Often this means that the studio needs to keep its fan community "entertained" for 2+ years, corresponding with the observations by Baym (2015). As a large part of the marketing is done at the grassroots level, facing the audience almost one-on-one, it could be argued that every individual associated with the project does marketing (e.g., spreading the word and giving a trustworthy, human face to the project). All of this highlights how the core of game development, also for crowdfunded independent games, has shifted away from making the game toward promotion and marketing, a development that draws comparisons to the development of *F2P games* and their move toward metrics (Kerr, 2017, p. 91).

Crowdfunding offers a good example of how the production lifecycle of independent games has evolved during the last decade. Some projects, for example, see gaining publicity and a player community as their most important goal. The chronology of the lifecycle has changed too: building a polished prototype, continuous marketing, financing, and direct customer service all need to be considered much earlier in the production cycle than previously. Despite these hardships, many successful crowdfunding projects now manage to avoid the need to take large loans to finance the development period and in turn can keep the rights to the developed IP. One implication of this kind of development might be the emergence of a new kind of developer–publisher relationship. Instead of being the central broker in the production network, smaller publishers such as 505 Games might be content with being "equal" partners, helping with marketing and visibility and taking care of distribution—leaving the developer more time for actual development. Additionally, as developers become more open about the collaborators they use, small-scale intermediaries are able to get more visibility.

The crowdfunding model is a result of increasing globalization and the consecutive networking of markets and user communities. It is positioned between emerging participatory culture practices and the commercial powers that seek to appropriate and harness these practices. While the model has the potential to be a more emancipatory and democratic area of cultural production, this article has tried to highlight how it has become more and more saturated with market mechanisms moving in from more traditional production logics. The implication is not necessarily that these commercial logics slowly seek to commoditize cultural production—although that too can be argued—but that the crowdfunding model constitutes one of the new forms of "hybrid relations that cut across the commercial and noncommercial social networks and markets" and that the true value of these relations remains to be seen (Banks & Humphreys, 2008, p. 402). Different kinds of dual roles illustrate the blurring of lines between production roles in social network markets but also serve as an example of how everywhere in the contemporary global economy fewer

resources are expected to produce more. Furthermore, the crowdfunding model highlights how the element of risk moves downward within cultural production: by taking the publishing duties into their own hands, independent game developers move the risk onto themselves and through crowdfunding this risk is then moved partly or entirely to the player users.

Further research is needed on the conditions of independent game production and how gamecrowdfunding affects and shapes both the possibilities of game makers and the resulting cultural texts. Additionally, more studies are needed on how the crowdfunding model itself evolves—as a tool and a platform—as more commercial forces find it and find new and possibly more effective ways to use it and as future policies shape it.

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PUBLICATION
II

Why Do We Crowdfund? An Empirical Study of Consumer Value in Games Crowdfunding

Heikki Tyni & Juho Hamari

(Submitted)

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PUBLICATION III

Spectating Development and Other Backer Perspectives on Games Crowdfunding

Heikki Tyni

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Spectating development and other backer perspectives on games crowdfunding

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ABSTRACT
During the last decade, crowdfunding has become a significant new means to fund creative productions. Rather than being simply about acquiring the funded product or service, a closer look at crowdfunding reveals that backers attach many kinds of meanings and motivations to it. This article describes an exploratory study on backer motivations to participate in games crowdfunding. Utilizing two sets of data from an online survey, a quantitative section (N=426) and a qualitative section with open answers, it is found out that, among others, backers enjoy spectating game development, linking crowdfunding participation to new forms of consumption in the evolving media culture.

Keywords
Crowdfunding, backer survey, game production, game production studies

INTRODUCTION
During the last decade, crowdfunding has become a significant new means to fund creative productions. With 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 at crowdfunding reveals that backers attach many kinds of meanings and motivations to it. Subsequently, this study seeks to deepen understanding on why backers take part in game crowdfunding. The study utilizes a dataset from an online survey on games crowdfunding (N=426) and a subset of respondents (N=114) who answered a qualitative section in this survey. While an earlier study (Hamari & Tyni; in review) 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 open answers are then contextualized and interpreted through the quantitative data.

Crowdfunding model has been examined dominantly in business and economic studies with focus on possible factors behind campaign success (Mollick, 2014; Greenberg et al., 2013; Mitra & Gilbert, 2014), factors signaling campaign legitimacy (Frydrych et al., 2014), determinants for backing behavior (Burtch et al., 2014;

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Bernstein et al., 2017; Gerber & Hui, 2013), creator motivations (Belleflamme et al., 2014; Gerber & Hui, 2013), and the effects of location (Agrawal et al., 2010), among others. Within the topic of games, research has looked into the production networks of games crowdfunding (Nucciarelli et al., 2017; Tyni, 2017), the backer influence on project creators (Smith, 2015) and the creator rhetoric surrounding the campaigns (Planells, 2015).

This study adopts a 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). By uncovering emerging backer views through open answers in an exploratory fashion, the study seeks to highlight interesting and important points of contention lying in different cross-sections of the games crowdfunding ecosystem. Among other things, it is interested in how the various interests of the backers affect this ecosystem; how backers run, speed up or slow down the machinations of the system on their part.

DATA AND METHOD

The study utilizes data from an online survey (N=426), centered on backer attitudes and motivations for participating in games crowdfunding. The survey was hosted on SurveyGizmo and was open during Sep 30th–Nov 15th, 2016. A link to the survey was distributed within: [1] the author's social networks, including Facebook, Twitter and LinkedIn (including a game development themed group), where it was further shared by colleagues and friends following the snowball sampling method; [2] the international Digital Games Research Association (DiGRA) email list; [3] the comment sections of 26 Kickstarter game projects chosen on the basis of convenience, i.e. they were projects funded by the author; [4] a project update for a successfully crowdfunded tabletop game *Dale of Merchants 2* (Snowdale Design 2016), where a smaller questionnaire related to that game linked to the research survey; [5] the official fan forum of the crowdfunded digital game, *Bloodstained: Ritual of the Night* (505 Games, 2018); and [6] Reddit, in a sub-reddit of a crowdfunded digital game, *Battle Chasers: Nightwar* (THQ Nordic, 2017).

A related research paper based on the quantitative data from the survey (Hamari & Tyni; in review) aimed to uncover which kinds of consumer value backers attach to their crowdfunding participation. The study utilized a modified version of the perceived value framework (PERVAL) (Sweeney & Soutar, 2001). Respondents attitude towards usefulness, cost, quality, enjoyment, community, social influence, altruism, co-creation, anti-corporate sentiments, novelty, rarity and cynical perceptions was measured to see which aspects were positively associated with enjoying crowdfunding participation, along with continued backing intentions. Each value category was tested with two hypotheses ("X is positively/negatively associated with funders' attitudes towards crowdfunding" and "X is positively/negatively associated with funders' backing intentions").

While the main section of the survey was quantitative and consisted of seven pages of Likert-items, 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 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 several lines long passages). Additionally, a smaller follow-

up survey was sent to a randomized subset of the respondents (50) who answered one of the open questions in the main survey. This survey had four open questions centered on issues concerning backers' backing and playing habits, including questions on how much they used time for these activities and whether they saw crowdfunding to be a hobby of theirs. The follow-up survey resulted into 39 usable answers.

All of the open answers were coded and organized into thematic groups. The open section in the first study was intended to be explorative and we did not set any hypotheses to be confirmed or refuted in advance. However, the preceding analysis of the quantitative data contextualized the emergence of the themes and informed the subsequent analysis. The follow-up survey was inspired and informed by the results of the first survey and focused on giving more information on what were the primary motivators for backers' funding activity, i.e. were there backers who strongly stressed other motivations to back game crowdfunding projects besides getting the game and playing it. Some themes started to saturate, whereas some were more uniquely explored by one or two respondents. The analysis presented here is mostly based on the main survey, with the answers from the follow-up survey mostly fleshing out and deepening the same themes. The responses were organized under wider frames of meaning, elaborated in the analysis chapter. The highlighted categories are in no way exclusive, instead overlapping in various ways.

On secondary level, the analysis is supported by a long-term observant participation in game crowdfunding campaigns[1] and research interviews with professionals involved with crowdfunding campaigns, including game developers, crowdfunding intermediaries, and Kickstarter staff. The study is focused on games crowdfunding, particularly on digital and board games. In addition to distributing the link to the survey in game-related channels, the survey included a question 'Have you backed game projects?', and only those who answered 'Yes' were included in the data. Yet, some respondents talked about projects in other categories too, such as 'design' and 'technology', and this is consecutively reflected in some of the included quotes. Furthermore, the focus is on reward-based crowdfunding, i.e. it is assumed that campaigns offer the (eventually) finished game as a reward for backing the campaign on a high enough level.

ANALYSIS

The analysis of the quantitative sections in the survey confirmed many of our hypotheses (Hamari & Tyni; in review), including that perceived usefulness, cost, enjoyment, and social influence were all positively associated with both funders' attitude towards crowdfunding and their continued backing intentions. As expected, it was also proven that various cynical perceptions towards the model (e.g. that it is hard to trust the model since large corporations have appropriated it for marketing purposes) had a negative association with attitude and continued backing intentions.

There were also some surprising discrepancies in the results related to either or both of the associated hypotheses. First, product quality, community and co-creation

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[1] During 2013-2018, we have participated in 68 crowdfunding campaigns, 56 of which were successful and 12 unsuccessful. 37 were digital game projects and 19 tabletop gaming projects. 7 digital games and 7 tabletop games were backed on high enough to get the game as a reward, whereas all the others were funded on minimum level to receive the project updates.

aspects did not have relevant significance (i.e. clear positive association) with enjoying crowdfunding participation. In fact, valuing community aspects had a clear negative association with continued backing intentions. Second, altruistic, anti-corporate, novelty and rarity aspects all were positively associated only with one of the two hypotheses. For example, while the ideological aspects such as altruism and anti-corporate sentiments had a positive association with the attitude towards crowdfunding, they did not seem to translate further into actual continued backing behavior. Instead, the more individualistic, gain-seeking related motivations, such as usefulness and seeking cost benefits were proved to be dominant predictors of continued backing. We concluded that while many backers with the willingness to help others and support independent production may perceive crowdfunding more positively, they might not be more willing to actually fund more crowdfunding projects than those backers for whom such aspects are not important in crowdfunding.

In the following, the identified themes from the open answer section are elaborated and reflected through the quantitative results. As a qualitative study, this analysis aims to give depth to the findings from the quantitative part of the survey and tease out findings that partly or entirely fall outside of the quantitative results.

Game product

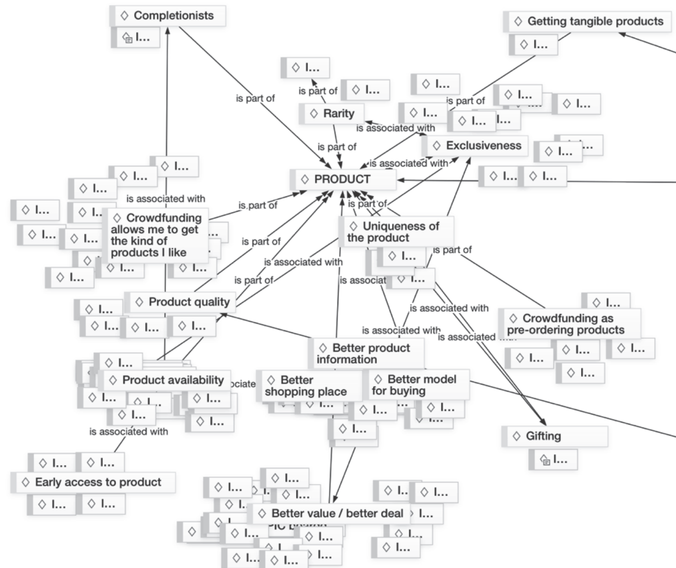

Figure 1. Game product

The topic that garnered most mentions were the different aspects related to **the game product** itself. First of all, quite a few answers simply highlighted crowdfunding as a means to acquire a product they wanted for whatever reason (such as an interesting game mechanic or theme). Contrasting this notion with the philanthropic possibilities of crowdfunding, one respondent told: “I wish I'd honestly say I back project for any humanitarian, social justice kind of reasons and feel like Bono but reality is, I back to get the product.” (ID39)

Many respondents detailed that crowdfunding allowed them to get products that were ‘tailor-made’ for them, i.e. items that are aimed at a very specific but narrow audience

and would be difficult or impossible to get from anywhere else. For example, one respondent told that:

> *"I can get 'niche' items that would never be made or available elsewhere. HP Lovecraft goods, Douglas TenNapel art books, etc -- nowhere else can I get these products" (ID118).*

Another respondent continued that: "Most of my gaming interests are in niche markets where traditional funding and manufacturing just won't work" (ID112). One respondent participated crowdfunding as a way to fund an independent game mimicking a successful old franchise that was in danger of being discontinued by the IP holder due to not being profitable enough anymore (ID158). For one respondent, crowdfunding allowed getting digital games as physical copies, something they described as the return of the tangible product (ID167).

On the other hand, many answers highlighted a less focused attitude where the respondent expressed a wish to be entertained, i.e. they wanted to be presented **exciting, interesting or unique products** that captured their imagination – something that the crowdfunding platforms with their social recommendation systems are designed to do. One respondent described how crowdfunding represented an environment that keeps producing "unique and interesting" games they wanted to see more of (ID159). The model was complemented for both acting as a place where users could find new products that they could not find anywhere else and as a filtering mechanism, that sometimes helped to "find a new, useful, good idea" (ID126) from the plethora of products on offer on the internet as a whole.

Interestingly, in the survey data, higher-than-average **product quality** did not register as a significant factor to crowdfunding backers' attitude or continued backing intentions, either in positive or negative way. Coming back to the "tailor-made" product, this suggests that instead of higher quality products, backers are simply satisfied with getting the *right kind* of product. The open answers mostly support this; few respondents brought up high product quality as the distinct reason for their participation, with some answers highlighting how crowdfunded products vary greatly in quality.

The **exclusiveness of the products** was brought up as a reason for participation many times. After the campaign, a crowdfunded product might not be available anywhere in the same form. It is a widely used practice to offer extra content or material on top of the core product that is exclusive to campaign backers. Some games are even directly advertised as crowdfunding exclusive, i.e. that the game is only ever available through that campaign. Several respondents specifically told that they enjoyed getting exclusive content. Crowdfunding projects also often offer opportunities for customizing products. Semi-unique products also make good personalized gifts, with some respondents bringing up how they crowdfunded products to give to their friends.

Contrary to our initial hypothesis, in the survey answers enjoying 'rarity' aspects were negatively associated with positive attitude towards crowdfunding despite having a positive association with continued backing intentions. This discrepancy could be seen to be the flip-side of the exclusiveness: some respondents dislike campaigns offering exclusive product features during the campaign phase, i.e. the use of artificial scarcity mechanisms. Offering campaign exclusive content might feel like strong-arming interested consumers to back campaigns instead of waiting for a general release. It is also possible that exclusive extra content feels like something cut

from the main product, something that is missing from the general release. Despite these feelings of resentment, backers might still feel compelled to continue backing, i.e. collecting these nevertheless interesting products while there is still a chance to do so. As one respondent put it:

> *"I really hate the shift toward Kickstarter. I wish companies would do things themselves. However, I find myself almost forced to participate in these campaigns in order to get complete products." (ID28)*

It is interesting to consider how crowdfunding campaigns apparently are able to capture backers' imagination so effectively while the games are still in a stage of incompleteness. Perhaps it is precisely this incompleteness that works for their favor: in their unrealized stage games are still full of promise and possibilities, with the reality of the finished product possibly years away. If the project is not able to convert the backer during campaign phase, it might be too late. "[I]f I didn't back [the projects I'm interested in], I probably wouldn't get around to buying them when they are released", one respondent told (ID21).

Many respondents saw crowdfunding offering **a good deal** in terms of content-price balance, overall price, or delivery. "You definitely want to get see a campaign meet its goal, but I definitely feel that 'getting a deal' (price, early delivery, a special edition) is part of the appeal", one respondent explained (ID170). Particularly, several respondents brought up that the crowdfunding option offers **more or better value** than the eventual retail option. For most cases, this opinion seemed to revolve around crowdfunding campaigns offering a lot of extra content. While digital games campaigns sometimes offer exclusive digital content on top of the base game, many board game campaigns are based on offering more and more campaign-exclusive miniatures, unlocked as the campaign clears its stretch goals. Many singled out that the crowdfunding option felt like a better deal because of campaign stretch goals. The more stretch goals the campaign cleared, the more there was content, and the better the deal started to seem like – especially compared to the retail version which presumably would be a bare-bones version of the game. As such, the available campaign version felt cheap(er), but, specifically, in relation to the retail version of the game. In fact, this is not always true; retail version often has the same price (but comes with none of the extra content). The argument about the price applies especially to board games. When talking about the games on digital storefronts, the retail release actually quite soon decreases in price after the first month of sales.

Many respondents highlighted the issue of physical **delivery and distribution**. While digital games campaigns sometimes offer a physical game copy or physical extra content that needs to be posted, board game projects, by default, need to place a lot of attention on delivery. With a large number of delicate miniatures this might cost substantially. Many answers brought up how many crowdfunded games might not be available at all in a retail store in their country or that the retail version might cost substantially more because of distributor costs or taxes. This refers to the fact that, because of the special relationship with crowdfunding creators and backers, backers are sometimes able to inform and influence campaigns about the most inexpensive solutions for delivery, a possibility they might not have with local game stores. Many respondents also told that the games might simply not be available in their country at all – that the campaign phase was the only option for them to get the games.

Some respondents felt that the crowdfunding model offers **better information** on the qualities of the product, sometimes also on **how the product develops** over time.

Having better information on the product can further translate into seeing the crowdfunding model as a better model for making purchases:

> *"The information available to the buyer in a crowd funding campaign is far superior to almost every other commercial form. [...] KS campaigns go into great depth about the product, components, game theory, instructions, philosophy, and capabilities of the game." (ID89)*

Philanthropic attitude towards products, ideas and creators

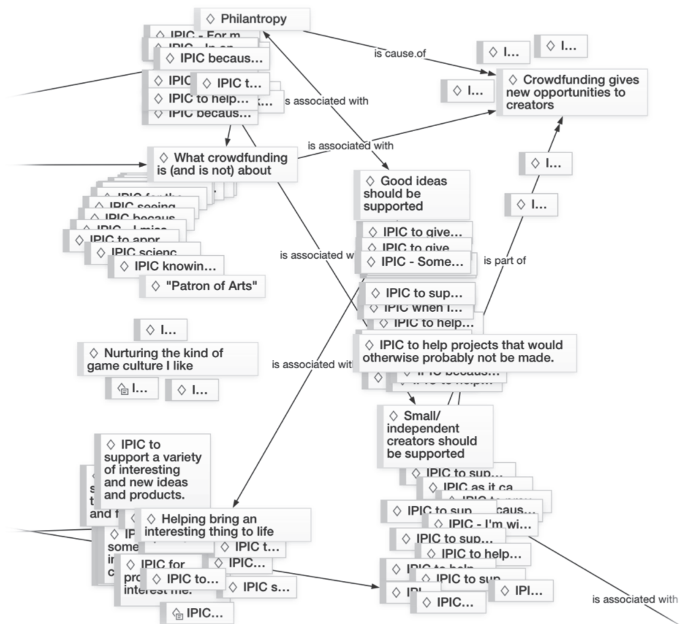

Figure 2. Philanthropic attitudes

In addition to those backers who wanted to fund a certain kind of product to get for themselves, many respondents felt that on a more general level crowdfunding is about helping bring products that 'should exist' into reality, or more specifically, helping create products that would not otherwise get made. While these two mindsets are not necessarily mutually exclusive, a significant number of respondents did specifically feel that at its heart crowdfunding is not about acquiring the crowdfunded product (even when it is offered as a reward). The responses that highlighted this kind of more **philanthropic** motive could be divided into two stances. First, there was the product-centric attitude that was about endorsing arts or science or fostering innovation, i.e. turning interesting and worthy product ideas into reality. Respondents described wanting to support ideas and products that were, for example, innovative, experimental, interesting, fresh, fun, new, and exciting. Second, there was a more creator-centric attitude, focused on giving worthy creators an opportunity or helping a cause. One respondent for example told that "the way [the campaign creator] communicated with the backers and tried to implement their ideas was so awesome, that I decided the support his effort even if it was not financially really worth it" (ID35b). Many respondents told specifically that it was important to support small or independent creators (e.g. in opposition to large companies who did not listen to fans). One respondent saw that:

> *"I don't want all of my games made by company X all the time, they get locked in their view of how things should be. Smaller guys usually have different approaches." (ID151)*

Another respondent laid out quite aptly how the crowdfunding environment has changed in this regard:

> *"[T]here are basically at least three types of […]: a. The "I have a dream"-campaign - usually a single person who has a creative vision. It might not be realistic or terribly well planned (neither time-wise nor financially), but their enthusiasm is infectuous. I'm willing to cut such projects a lot of slack and am largely okay with not receiving a product at the end. b. Small companies and individuals offering a more or less professional product. The product is largely planned and scheduled, but there's still room for backer input (usually, but not always for the better). c. Large, well-financed companies offering a finished product, usually with exclusive content or at a reduced price. In my experience, whereas a) used to be the norm and b) was the exception, there are very few a) project these days. b) is now the norm, with an increasing number of c) campaigns. […]. While I enjoy getting a good product at the end of the day, I do miss more of the a) type campaigns, which I feel defines what crowd funding should be about." (ID71)*

Besides the more philanthropic views, some respondents considered crowdfunding to be a combination of philanthropy and a means to get products they like. As such, they felt that crowdfunding is beneficial for both the creators and the backers. "[I]f it's a product I'm interested in and it helps someone out it's a win win", one respondent saw and continued: "I get a cool thing and a good feeling" (ID75). Another respondent acknowledged that crowdfunded products are often available later on at a lower cost, but that "part of the joy in crowdfunding is getting something I'm interested in created" (ID7).

Development

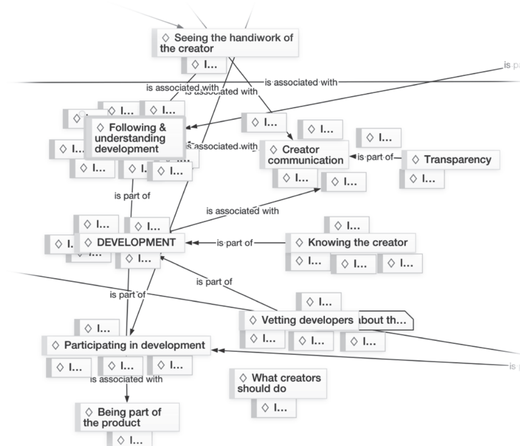

Figure 3. Development

Another category that gathered a lot of mentions was development. First of all, many respondents felt that **following the development process** through project updates is

interesting or enjoyable (e.g. ID186, ID134, ID151). The importance of crowdfunding project updates has been highlighted before: Mollick (2014) found out that project updates during the campaign were an important correlating factor with project success. On the other hand, many backers feel that regular updates *after the campaign* are a very important part of the project, whether it is to signal backers that work is progressing on the project or simply to follow development because it is seen to be interesting. Baym (2015) talks about 'relational labor' and how many creative industry employees are now required to engage in "regular, ongoing communication with audiences over time to build social relationships that foster paid work." For the author, having followed dozens of campaigns, it has come up again and again how dismayed backers are about project creators who do not update regularly. Highlighting the importance of **backer-creator communication**, one respondent told that:

> *"[A]s I do view my money as a microinvestment I do believe I am entitled to know what is going on with the process. […] At least a fifth of my backed projects are ones I have backed without selecting a reward, but I am just as interested in knowing what happens and there's a sense of loss when a creator doesn't update." (ID2)*

As such, besides the mere obligation, there is additional value in the updates; several respondents directly said that they like to "watch" development (ID171, ID192, ID105, ID81). One respondent brought up how they knew they were paying a higher price compared to what would be later available on Amazon but, despite this, getting to see the product developed was one reason that made the process a rewarding experience (ID132). Following project updates can also offer a way to better **understand** or **appreciate the development** process, whether it was about software development or physical production process such as creating a miniature-based board game. One respondent felt that:

> *"Most people who buy things have no idea what goes into making those things. A good side-effect of crowdfunding (and similar communities, such as web comics) is that people who otherwise wouldn't be involved in creative endeavours become educated about the process. It's not an assembly line with a predictable outcome at the end and never has been." (ID194)*

Interestingly, **opportunities for co-creation** were viewed with mixed feelings among the respondents. In the open answers, there were some respondents who identified taking part in development process as an important aspect. Surprisingly however, in the quantitative results participating in the development of the crowdfunded product had a minor negative association with both backer attitude and continued backing intentions. The most immediate explanation for this is that many backers consider the crowdfunding system as a means to empower cultural creators whose vision they trust (see section: 'Bringing things into reality'). Subsequently, those backers are not very interested in controlling the final shape of the product beyond greenlighting the initial concept. This could be seen reinforcing the view that backers revere the position of a clearly appointed cultural author, i.e. the 'voice' of the author coming through from cultural products such as games. "One sometimes wonders how the money is spent", one respondent divulged, "but that is ultimately up to the creator. We're just the backers." (ID7) The autonomy of the author is supported by backers also harboring anti-capitalist sentiments, e.g. that crowdfunding allows ways to bypass the production models favored by large corporations, where individual author expression is typically not favored:

> *"[Crowdfunding] can be a tremendous tool to allowing smaller creators with big ideas to get their projects made. Especially without being tampered with by investors or other parties. […]. Creator control to see a vision through start to finish is important to me." (ID76)*

Community

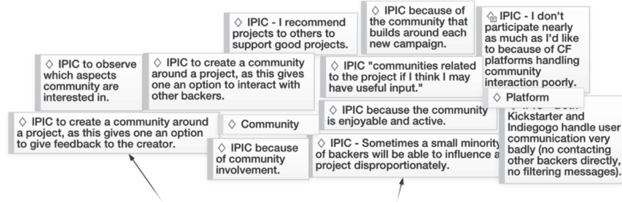

Figure 4. Community

For some respondents, crowdfunding campaigns presented an opportunity to join or help create a community around a game they like. These respondents felt that interacting with an active community was enjoyable and seeing which aspects of the product others were keen on was interesting. "I get to talk to people in the comments, I have friends in real life who also back the same games (sometimes) so we discuss the new games and why we are backing them (or not)." (ID27b) Crowdfunded games bring people together on a more granular level, too: one respondent told how they use crowdfunded games to impress friends who have never heard about these games (ID12). However, as a criticism, it was brought up that crowdfunding platforms like Kickstarter have poor backer communication tools, with no way to organize or filter messages on the project site; one needs to manually search through possibly thousands of messages across the general message board and different updates.

Moreover, in our quantitative study, 'community' did not register as a significant factor related to attitude towards crowdfunding (i.e. that valuing community aspects would correlate with the respondent valuing crowdfunding participation in general). In fact, community had a negative correlation with continued backing intentions. One possible explanation for this might be that backers view community as a precarious force that can affect the development process also in a negative way. One respondent felt that: "Backer feedback to the creator is a double-edged sword - while it can give some much needed input, sometimes a small group of very vocal backers will be able to influence a project in a way that their number just can't justify." (ID71) Along with the similar results related to co-creation possibilities, this might suggest that backers feel that creators should be left to handle the creation process, with the role of the backer minimized.

Another explanation for the quantitative results might be that those backers who enjoy community aspects are more focused on a single project, instead of perceiving their crowdfunding backing as a long-term hobby. Thus, those backers might not see crowdfunding as nothing more than a (risky) tool for bringing a product they want into existence, while at the same time they might be inclined to enjoy the community aspects around their chosen project. Also, the backers might be able to find other means to engage the communities surrounding the projects besides the community features of the platforms (e.g. *ad hoc* fan forums).

Crowdfunding as an enjoyable activity

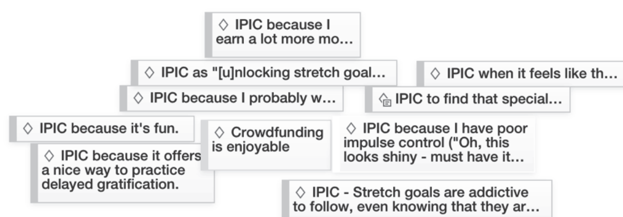

Figure 5. Crowdfunding as an enjoyable activity

Respondents identified participating in crowdfunding campaigns as a pleasant activity for various reasons. Some respondents simply felt that it was the right thing to do, highlighting philanthropic goals and that helping others felt good: "I get the impression that I'm helping things get made that would otherwise not get made. And potentially make some ones dream come true" (ID75). "Its exciting to help people realise their goals and be a part of the journey", another respondent mused (ID78). A few responses brought up how it felt enjoyable to see a product they have funded get to the marketplace. There were some respondents for whom getting, or even seeing, the product before retail release felt important, or even something they "enjoy greatly" (ID20). It was also brought up how the stretch goals represented an important part of the appeal: "Unlocking stretch goals can be very exciting" (ID131), one respondent told, while another divulged:

> *"Stretch goals are rather addictive as well--I find myself regularly monitoring the campaign just to track progress on stretch goals. I know I am being manipulated by stretch goals but it doesn't really bother me." (ID170)*

The survey data revealed that many backers have funded several projects over time, and the open answer data from the main survey supported that for some crowdfunding is **a hobby-like activity**. Consecutively, in the follow-up survey roughly half of the respondents considered crowdfunding to be a hobby of theirs.

> *"At this point, yes [I do consider it a hobby of mine]. The delayed gratification is great. It is also interesting to scroll through the comments and witness the fan base behavior." (ID31b)*

One respondent who saw crowdfunding as their hobby highlighted how they had funded several games without necessarily playing them, but wanted others to play games they had funded and considered interesting. Many saw that crowdfunding was a part of their wider gaming hobby, or that it supported their gaming hobby without being a hobby in itself. (e.g. ID7b, ID34b, ID36b) Some respondents who declined to call crowdfunding a hobby, saw it instead as a "bad habit" they cannot get rid of (ID12b, ID21b). One respondent mused:

> *"[I]t isn't a hobby. I would liken it to a parent at their child's sporting event...the parents want the kids to have fun, have a good experience, to learn something, to participate, and become a better kid, but they really don't care about the team or the actual sport or even the coaches after the fact and even winning or losing isn't all that important in the end...as long as their child grows and becomes more. [...] I would say it is more an investor mentality than a hobbyist mentality." (ID23b)*

One respondent described crowdfunding as their hobby and that they always ordered several copies of the crowdfunded product and always went for the most expensive, limited rewards, only to sell the extra copies for a large profit later on; this made the "hobby" much cheaper on the long run. Another respondent described their drive to continue this hobby through wanting to find "that special gem" – a project that becomes a huge hit akin to Oculus Rift (ID148). Another respondent, taking quite a serious stance, felt that crowdfunding was not a hobby for everybody and seemed to take pride in being able to choose the right campaigns:

> *"Backing projects is not for everyone. In over 50 projects backed I have only been burned by a creator 3 times. This is because I put a great deal of effort into choosing the projects I back." (ID2)*

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, e.g. nurture a better kind of game culture through greenlighting quality games. Some respondents linked this sentiment to the existing production structures in the game industry, with one specifying that: "[I]n general [I participate in crowdfunding to] lower the influence of publishers on game making" (ID146). Another one told:

> *"Certainly for video games, which make up the majority of my backed projects, [crowdfunding] allows developers to take risks they would not be able to do under the thumb of AAA publishers. I strongly think that's worth supporting." (ID93)*

Some respondents felt that the crowdfunding model in general has become too saturated to function anymore, or that there have been enough too ambitious high-profile campaigns failing so as to make people fear (perhaps unnecessarily) that with small campaigns too.

Since the basic premise of crowdfunding is to back a risky venture, it is important to make a note on how many backers seem to view crowdfunding simply as a pre-order system, for example feeling that, should a project end up failing, project creators are required to compensate them akin to a regular store. In the quantitative data, three quarters of the respondents reported to at least somewhat agreeing that crowdfunding a product is like pre-ordering it, and roughly two thirds of the respondents agreed that crowdfunding a product is the same as buying that product. One respondent wondered "is it really crowd funding or just a pre-order [...] with a social touch..." (ID157) Another respondent saw that because "[t]hings have been professionalized, […] backers have come to expect a professional product and often treat crowd funding as a preorder system" (ID71).

These views are no doubt more prevalent with board game projects. Compared to digital games that sometimes can win an audience with good audiovisual presentation alone, board games are much more dependent on a working rule system, with many projects offering a free, completely working paper prototype in their campaign phase. Board game projects also often advertise how the game has been tested on multiple different game conventions and fairs. As such, they are in a relatively more finished stage during the crowdfunding campaign, leaving many backers to consider them finished products that simply gauge how large a print run they should order.

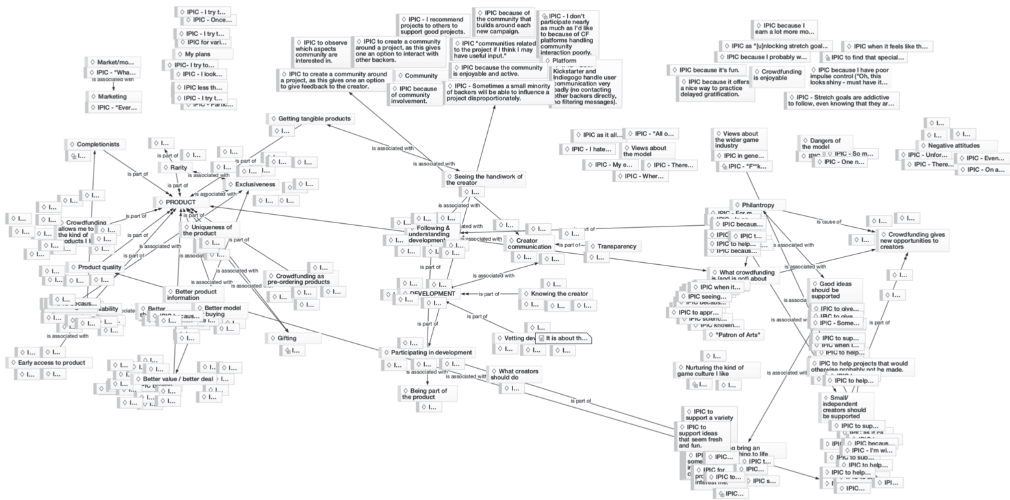

Figure 6. The complete code network

DISCUSSION & CONCLUSIONS

This article has explored open answers given by crowdfunding backers for participating in games crowdfunding. Analysis gives ample evidence that backers participate in games crowdfunding for many other reasons too besides the obvious benefit of getting the product, such as to follow development and to access and interact with a peer-community. The results here corroborate with similar results from previous studies that have analyzed crowdfunding on a more general level. For example, Gerber and Hui (2013) found out that motivations to become a crowdfunding backer included collecting rewards, helping others, being part of a community and supporting a cause.

Describing the information behavior of players in game-related social media, Harviainen, Gough and Sköld (2012) make the case that players use game-related information behavior, such as information seeking and sharing, as expansion and substitution of play. Social media are, for example "used as pre-commentary and speculation systems" where "monitoring for the slightest morsel of new information becomes a part of the anticipation that precedes the release of new games." (p. 156, 161)

The most notable new findings of this study are the motivations that we can see to be more specific for crowdfunding of games. In the analyzed data, the role of development as a motivation for backer participation emerges as one of the main themes. We found out that some backers enjoy **spectating development**, giving grounds to view this activity as a newly emerging form of consumption. These results corroborate studies that describe how players use game-related information behavior, such as information seeking and sharing, as expansion and substitution of play (Harviainen et al., 2012). On the other hand, spectating development can be seen both mirroring the wider landscape of independent game development, while at the same time connecting to the wider landscape of media culture. Ian Bogost (2012) compared crowdfunding to shopping channels and reality TV, while we would specifically compare the consumption of crowdfunding campaigns to reality-series following different professions.

The connection shared by crowdfunding creators and backers offers an example of newly emerging hybrid relationships evident in the wider media industry, where traditional notions of who captures value become outdated (Banks & Humphreys, 2008), and creators are forced to re-evaluate what is required of them, for example in terms of creator-fan communication (Baym, 2015). It is clear that in game crowdfunding one aspect related to the excitement of backer participation is taking part in the development process. Mostly it seems that this has less to do with designing parts of the game, and more to do with following along, being a passenger in the process with better-than-ordinary backstage pass. As crowdfunding system is a system where users pay beforehand for the development of a game, they also pay for those development processes that do not succeed (i.e. they do not yield a playable product at the end of the process). It is a system that first and foremost pays for development (not the product). As such, struggling or failing campaigns, too, have potential worth as something to be consumed through watching, as experiences (cf. "experience economy"; Pine & Gilmore 2011). Here, game development through crowdfunding can also be seen connecting to the emerging phenomenon of live streaming game development (see e.g. Consalvo & Phelps, 2019).

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PUBLICATION IV

Game Retail and Crowdfunding

Heikki Tyni & Olli Sotamaa

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4

Game Retail and Crowdfunding

HEIKKI TYNI AND OLLI SOTAMAA

In June 2015, over seventy-three thousand fans came together on the online crowdfunding platform Kickstarter to fund the development of a digital game called *Yooka-Laylee* (Playtonic Games, 2017). A spiritual successor to and a revival of the 3-D platformer genre popular during the Nintendo 64 era, *Yooka-Laylee* is an example of a high-profile crowdfunding campaign that enticed a significant consumer base to directly interact with an independent game studio and "prebuy" a game that, at the time, had neither been developed nor received the backing of a big publisher to guarantee its release. As such, this case illustrates how current game industry business models are intimately tied to participatory forms of media consumption. It also shows how online platforms that facilitate alternative funding schemes contest traditional ideas concerning the game commodity and its retail, necessitating new and more nuanced ways of understanding the relationship between buying and selling goods.

This chapter focuses on the relationship between digital games and crowdfunding. Crowdfunding a game means collecting relatively small monetary contributions from a relatively large online crowd to fund the development of the game. The reward for this is typically the complete game when it is finished, making the funder a preorder customer of sorts. Recent research on the digitalization of retailing identifies transformations along several different

fronts: retailing exchanges, the nature of retail offerings, settings and places of retail, and actors who participate in retailing.[1] The contemporary global game industry, defined by the advent of popular new gaming platforms, digital distribution services, and free-to-play models, exemplifies many of these transformations. In the context of this chapter, crowdfunding is considered as a special case of media retail that has both similarities and differences to other forms of retail. In academia, the crowdfunding of games has been described in a few seminal articles.[2] The topic of game retail has been researched before but only in passing and not from the perspective of crowdfunding. Considering the relationship of game retail and crowdfunding, this chapter breaks new ground in offering a unique perspective on both areas.

Within the past four decades, digital games have grown to an industry with an annual revenue of around $100 billion.[3] The evolution of video game retail has been characterized by a constant flow of new technologies and quickly emerging changes within the marketplace. In recent years, game studios worldwide have shifted from providing discrete offerings toward establishing ongoing relationships with their players. In other words, the days of digital games as "fire-and-forget" commodities seem to be numbered, as games are increasingly bought and sold as ongoing services that are routinely patched, updated, expanded, and modified.[4] This does not necessarily mean that the significance of retail is decreasing. It is, however, clear that incorporating service aspects to retail challenges us to rethink the nature, duration, and actors of media retail.

It has been argued that the contemporary media environment is defined by more complex relations between corporate media and grassroots participatory culture.[5] Many of the prospects attached to this new participatory culture were only a short while ago considered downright utopic but are now becoming a reality. This realizing potential has both good and not-so-good consequences: users have more power to shape and customize the products and services they are offered, but at the same time, marketing pressures drive cultural producers to aggressively fight for customer attention. Within game studies, this has resulted in calls for more attention to the push-pull dynamic between the industry and the players[6] and the blurring boundaries between people who develop games and those who play them.[7] Consequently, this chapter focuses more closely on the blurring of consumer purchases and retail salesmanship. In our reading, crowdfunding offers a "retailization" of development, underlining how media production in general and game development in particular play an important role in the study of emerging forms of retail.

When examining the relationship between media retail and crowdfunding, games offer a particularly apt topic of inquiry. Digital games have played a key role on leading crowdfunding platforms like Kickstarter and Indiegogo, popularizing new features and funding schemes (such as stretch goals, add-ons, and gamified campaigns) that are currently considered mainstream crowdfunding

practices.[8] Studying them will provide new information about game retail while also helping us better understand the dynamics of crowdfunding and its relation to conventional business models for media. In terms of method and data, this chapter draws from several approaches and data sets. Starting from the beginning of 2015, the authors have followed several different game crowdfunding campaigns as long-term case studies.[9] Case study analysis is supplemented with an online survey of crowdfunding backers conducted in the fall of 2016[10] and an ongoing interview study. The thematic interviews cover crowdfunding project creators, intermediaries who offer them services, and Kickstarter staff.

The chapter first gives a concise overview of the history and the current-day conditions of video game retail. It then describes the general characteristics of game crowdfunding, after which crowdfunding is discussed from the perspectives of preordering games, retailing crowdfunded games, and crowdfunding as a form of "retail spectacle." Finally, it is argued that games crowdfunding represents a unique case of "retailization" of consumption in which the backer-customers become agents of retail, exemplifying the emerging, hybrid forms of more participatory retail cultures.

Video Game Retail

The beginning of the modern video game industry is often associated with such early commercial games as *Computer Space* (1971) and *Pong* (1972) and the advent of the Magnavox Odyssey (1972). However, the roots of electronic gaming and the business around them can be tracked back at least to the industrial revolutions of the nineteenth and early twentieth century and the early coin-op machines and penny arcades.[11] Many of the early coin-operated video games were in fact manufactured by the companies responsible for the earlier coin-op amusements. Already the early game arcade business had a relatively clear division of labor: (1) manufacturers produced the machines, (2) distributors purchased them from manufacturers and then sold them to operators, (3) machine operators—normally also responsible for repair and maintenance—placed the machines in locations ranging from bars and bowling alleys to dedicated game arcades, and (4) location owners paid the costs of powering the video game machines on a day-to-day basis.[12] The income from the machines was normally divided equally between the machine operator and the location owner—the actors closest to the consumer. The very media form of commercial video games was closely intertwined with the commodity form: the early arcade games were designed to persuade players to insert quarter after quarter and therefore had no end.[13]

During the 1980s, Nintendo and Sega, especially, popularized what we now call the "traditional game industry," in terms of both the value chain and

game retail. This video game value chain consisted of (1) platform holders who provide and control the game consoles; (2) publishers who fund game productions; (3) developers who build games; (4) distributors, typically for each major market area; and (5) retailers who sell the games and consoles to consumers (Johns, 2006). A developer working in this environment needs to negotiate deals with the other parties or, more typically, make a deal with a publisher who will then handle the interaction with the other value chain actors. Often monetary connections tie the value chain parties together on different levels; for example, publishers may also pay licensing fees to platform holders, and different parties jointly monetize marketing efforts. Finally, each party takes its share from the retail price of a game sold. Traditionally, only 10–15 percent is collected by the developer, and the retailer retains around 30–35 percent of the video game retail value.[14]

Market research company Newzoo estimated the global game industry revenues to be more than $100 billion in 2017.[15] At the same time, GameStop, the largest video game retail outlet that operates more than seven thousand retail stores worldwide, reached global sales of only around $3 billion.[16] The business of traditional retailers, ranging from merchants such as Wal-Mart, Best Buy, and Toys "R" Us to independent brick-and-mortar retail stores has been challenged by rental options, mail subscription services, and kiosk rental services like RedBox.[17] The most significant transformations to retail are, however, provoked by digital distribution services. In 2010, studies indicated that digital distribution had only marginally affected traditional retail sales.[18] Five years later, however, it was estimated that retail-based game sales covered almost 30 percent of the annual global sales.[19] By 2016, the size of the digital distribution sector in the United States had risen to 56 percent of the total digital games market.[20] In the Asia-Pacific region, responsible for 47 percent of total global game revenues,[21] the share is expected to be even higher.

Today, each industry segment has its own digital distribution platforms. The console game segment, responsible for the largest share of the game industry revenues until the late 2000s, is controlled by the console manufacturers' online marketplaces including the PlayStation Store (Sony), Xbox Live Marketplace (Microsoft), and Nintendo eShop (Nintendo). At the same time, with annual revenues of around $3.5. billion, the Steam platform owned by Valve Corporation is expected to govern up to 75 percent of the PC market space for downloadable games.[22] Similarly, revenues from other related sectors such as free-to-play MMOs (massively multiplayer online games), social gaming, and PC downloadable content seem to be steadily growing.[23] The most rapid growth is identified in the mobile gaming sector, reported to account already for almost one-third of the global games market.[24] The mobile games market is dominated by the Apple App Store (iOS) and Google Play Store (Android) that both publish hundreds of new games every day.

Within digital distribution services, the platform owner has adopted a role very similar to the retailer. Platform owners typically take around 30 percent of the retail value of the game[25] and practically cut out the traditional retailers from the equation. At the same time, the rest of the pot, up to 70 percent, is reserved for the developer. It is easy to see why the new model attracts many game developers. It has made it very easy, almost for anyone, to launch a game commercially, and the game developer needs only to negotiate with the platform holder, who also controls the access to the digital storefront. While it is up to the game developer to decide whether they want to use additional funds—for example, for promotion or for hiring a dedicated publisher—they are normally able to secure a significantly improved profit margin when compared to the previous publisher-driven model.

Digital distribution and physical game retail intertwine in both direct and indirect ways. Besides selling new game copies, retail stores also benefit from secondhand sales of physical game commodities. In fact, selling a secondhand copy of a game is more lucrative for a retail store than selling a new game, as developers, publishers, and platform holders do not get a revenue share from a used game.[26] Consecutively, publishers and platform holders use various incentives to encourage customers to buy games through digital distribution, where games largely cannot be resold. Another area that highlights the same conflict of interests is preordering. To combat secondhand sales, preordering of new games is now aggressively encouraged by publishers in various ways. A sizeable section of gameplay might, for example, be cut from an upcoming title, to be introduced as exclusive downloadable content for those who preordered the game. At the same time—due to the continued importance of the largest retail chains in selling the biggest games—game studios often provide retailers like GameStop and Wal-Mart with chain-exclusive preorder content, which the retailers then use to combat other stores, both physical and digital.[27] Additionally, GameStop has recently announced that it is starting to publish games itself,[28] reflecting the drastic measures the world's largest video game retail chain is taking in order to keep itself integrated in the digital game value chain.

Crowdfunding Games

To crowdfund a game means that there is a project creator (a game developer) who publicly presents a prototype or a design document of a game online, typically on a crowdfunding platform, to collect relatively small monetary contributions from a relatively large online crowd to fund the development of the game. In almost every case, the people who donate to the campaign, the "backers," are offered the complete game as a reward as soon as it is finished. Typically, the project creator creates a pitch video in which they describe the

game they would like to make, the skills and assets that prove they can actually execute the plan, and possible concept art, alpha footage, or a prototype of the early version of the game.

Funding is based on a tiered system, where each funding tier offers increasing rewards. With game campaigns, the lowest reward tier is typically set at ten to twenty dollars, offering a digital download of the game when it is eventually ready—a sum that is mostly in line with the average cost of a new game on Steam. At the same time, higher reward tiers might offer a physical game copy, a soundtrack, signed artwork, and so on.[29] In most cases, backers can also donate a sum below the lowest tier, which still gives them access to project updates—which can be backer exclusive—and allows them to be listed as backers on the platform site. Project creators get to keep everything they receive on top of their minimum goal and, typically, gradually rising "stretch goals" are used to describe how the project will use the extra funds should any be collected. In most cases, stretch goals expand and flesh out the game in various ways. Additionally, many campaigns sell add-on content that is not included in the reward tiers. However, pledging for that content still raises the overall funding of the project—and therefore adds to the momentum that most projects strive toward.

On Kickstarter, the top of the campaign page is reserved for the pitch video, which therefore is the first site element the user will see. In general platform instructions, project creators are told that campaigns with a pitch video succeed significantly more often; subsequently, almost all campaigns have one nowadays. Next to the video, the page displays the progress and the goal of the campaign, the backer count, the remaining campaign time, and a highlighted "Back this project" button. Underneath this button, there is also a smaller "Remind me" button that lets registered users be notified about the campaign when there are only two days left. After the campaign has closed, the "Back this campaign" button is typically replaced with a suitable new button, such as "Follow the development," linking to a development blog; "Late-pledge this project," linking to a separate preorder site; or "Buy it now," linking to a digital storefront if the game is already released.

A typical Kickstarter page displays the items that the campaign aims to sell—or presell—as packaged reward tiers, used to tempt interested backers in a couple of different ways. Reward tiers are presented on the side panel of the page, with the cheapest tier on the top and the possible additional options getting gradually more expensive when scrolling down the page. Projects sometimes also offer reward tiers that are limited in number or time—for example, small batches of "Early Bird" tiers that are cheaper versions of the regular tiers. The lower parts of the campaign page offer more information on the project—featuring stylized graphics made specifically for the project, such as artwork, details on game mechanics, short profiles on team members, links to possible

demo versions, testimonials, and so on. It is also a common practice to display any possible stretch goals as a list that highlights the already unlocked content prominently while displaying one or more upcoming stretch goals as the next goal to beat. It is also quite typical to tease further upcoming stretch goal content with shadowed graphics. The highly successful campaign of *Bloodstained* (ArtPlay, 2018), for example, displayed the stretch goal progress as a stylized pixel-graphics castle that grew in size with the campaign, with stretch goals "moving" through the castle and a cellar trapdoor all the way to the dungeons. All this no doubt made following the campaign progress a much more enjoyable experience.

Crowdfunding as Preordering?

In terms of selling games, crowdfunding is primarily about preordering, as the game has not been made when the money is collected. Some campaigns—such as *Fear Effect Sedna* (Sushee, 2018), another project aimed at reviving a past game series—even label one or more reward tiers directly as a "Pre-order." Kickstarter also gives creators the option to allow the public to preview their page prior to the campaign start; this might be significant for getting last-minute feedback on the campaign but also to give backers a heads-up on limited preorder content, for example. The similarities between regular preordering and crowdfunding are also reflected in the attitudes of the backers. In their interview study, Elizabeth Gerber and Julie Hui found out that many backers "refer to the transaction as 'buying' and 'getting,' suggesting that crowdfunding shares some elements with the consumer experience."[30] Furthermore, in an online user survey conducted by the authors, three-quarters of the respondents reported to at least somewhat agree that crowdfunding a product is like preordering it, whereas roughly two-thirds agreed that crowdfunding a product is the same as buying that product. With crowdfunded board games, a campaign might also be openly labeled as funding a print run of a completed or slightly updated game. Furthermore, some board-gaming campaigns offer additional high-level reward tiers that are directed to retailers interested in reselling the game (e.g., "Retailer tier—Get 10 copies of the game for a small discount").

This preorder form that the crowdfunding model adopts has direct consequences. First, the used games market is of little consequence to crowdfunding campaigns. A developer who successfully manages to collect funding from the crowd for their game has complete control over its sales in the prerelease stage. Second, if the game is offered as a physical copy during the campaign, the crowdfunding model allows the developer to produce the exact number of copies with no need to worry about stock surplus.

This focus on preordering positions crowdfunding as a perfect example of what James Newman has called a "culture of obsolescence" that perpetually

foregrounds innovation, upgrade, and previewing, prevalent within the wider industry of digital games.[31] For him, the modern digital games business relies on planned obsolescence: the industry is built around the notion that games have short lifespans and they are retired quickly to clear room for the next coming-soon title.[32] In a sense, the crowdfunding model takes this "just around the corner," "coming soon" feeling to an extremity. Arguably, it is precisely this feeling that drives many backers to fund games that are still to be realized—"vaporware." In this preexisting, predefined stage, these games are full of possibilities. After years of completely hopeless and unheard fan campaigning, a crowdfunding campaign for *Shenmue 3* (Ys Net, 2018) appeared seemingly from nowhere and quickly became the highest-funded digital game on Kickstarter. While it very well might one day turn out to be yet another disappointing sequel, the crowdfunding campaign for *Shenmue 3* virtually fulfilled everybody's hopes and dreams of a perfect conclusion for the *Shenmue* franchise. Here, digital games, crowdfunding, and the emphasis on anticipation curl around each other.

While the optimism toward the positive outcome of a popular game crowdfunding project no doubt relates to several factors, arguably much of it is to do with the backers' perception of being able to influence the development of the game one way or the other—if not as an individual, then as a community that deserves to be heard. In our survey, almost three-quarters of respondents at least somewhat agreed that "participating in a crowdfunding campaign feels like taking part in the product's development." Two out of three respondents agreed that backing a campaign offered the respondent ways to influence the development of the crowdfunded product. Further, over half of the respondents agreed that in backing a crowdfunding campaign, they *wanted* to influence the product's development. Newman highlights how some preorder schemes give the customers the possibility of playing games prior to release—as beta releases—and how this makes the player-customers more than that: a part of the development team.[33] Newman writes, "The pleasures of engaging with [the game] in its unfinished state derive from being both a player and playtester, fan and de facto developer."[34]

Whereas with the traditional games industry, the "culture of obsolescence" stymies compatibility between old platforms and new software,[35] games crowdfunding offers one of the most direct channels to address this problem. It can be argued that the crowdfunding model liberates consumer-users from such corporate programming and allows them to concentrate on substantial projects created more by their peers than the faceless entertainment industry. Here, at its best, the "compatibility with redundant, superseded platforms and software" is restored and support continued.[36] Almost all the survey respondents agreed that they want to support independent development. When Newman argues that "by paying now and playing later, [preordering

player-customers] are literally buying into the future of videogames," he might as well be talking about (the idealistic nature of) crowdfunding as a perfect channel for small, independent game developers striving to release themselves from the oppressive publishers.[37]

Retailing Crowdfunded Games

Many factors, including the cost of development and the expected profits from the game sales, affect the selling of games in the crowdfunding model. The majority of crowdfunded digital games are released in a digital-only form because of the easiness and availability of digital distribution compared to the challenges of physical production. A smaller percentage of games are released as physical copies, although some of these are only a very limited run through small, specialized publishing houses and perhaps only in one of the key markets (the United States, Europe, and Japan).[38] Furthermore, the funding and production of games using the crowdfunding model can affect the actual form of the game in different ways.

Both traditionally sold games and crowdfunded games often offer expensive collector's editions that are reported to be a small, limited printing only. Many crowdfunding projects, however, state that besides this campaign-exclusive physical release, there will be no general release in the physical retail channels. During the development phase, this stance might be reevaluated—for example, if the project has generated a lot of positive interest among the player community and press—and the developer may partner with a publisher to bring out a physical release. *Yooka-Laylee*, for example, was not supposed to get a physical release, but over a year into the development process, Playtonic announced that a publisher, Team 17, would be bringing the game into retail stores after all. Furthermore, of the seventy-three thousand–plus *Yooka-Laylee* backers, roughly six thousand fans chose to get one of the more expensive physical editions that were offered during the campaign, and 625 fans pledged as much as £340 to get a "retro-themed physical package complete with classic box, SIGNED manual and an exclusive *Yooka-Laylee* N64 cartridge with built-in 64GB flash drive"[39].

Because the majority of crowdfunded digital games are being released through digital distribution only, a physical release for a game might be considered a specialty or luxury good. As with *Yooka-Laylee*, higher reward tiers many times offer campaign-exclusive versions of the game. Using *Gears of War 3* (Microsoft Studios, 2011) as an example, Newman highlights preorder schemes where exclusive content, such as special items and access to the beta version of the game, is offered: "The lure, exclusivity and distinctiveness of these unlockables which are available only through the beta access granted by the pre-order process and which are portioned out (and subsequently

revoked) over particular periods, work to create a sense of urgency in the pre-order transaction that belies the *prima facie* fact that there remain [many months] until the game is released."[40]

For Newman, access necessitates preordering. Similar arguments can certainly be applied to crowdfunding projects: offers promoting exclusivity grab backers' attention. Three out of four respondents in our survey agreed at least partially that "I sometimes fear that I will miss out on a good offer unless I back a campaign." Higher-tier campaign versions of crowdfunded games often become collectible rarities, as they typically are not available elsewhere after the campaign.

It has been argued that a crowdfunding campaign acts as a good indication of postlaunch demand.[41] Thus it follows that a highly successful crowdfunding campaign is an indication of high postlaunch demand. However, this has not always been the case; despite highly successful campaigns, *Mighty No. 9* (Comcept, 2016) and the OUYA game console did poorly on the postlaunch marketplace. Examples like these might be explained by poor execution of the products and the negative prelaunch reviews reflecting this—a situation that becomes even more possible due to crowdfunding backers usually receiving their products prior to general launch. *Mighty No. 9*, for example, was hampered by a problematic production period and delays—something that greatly irritated backers already before they had even received the game. Poor postlaunch success might also be an indication of the crucial core audience buying the crowdfunded product already in the campaign phase, leaving too few interested consumers to buy the game from retail channels.

From Game Retail to Spectacle Retail

One of the differences between retailing through crowdfunding and retail via brick-and-mortar or digital storefronts is the collective nature of the crowdfunding campaign experience. On the comments section of a popular crowdfunding campaign, whenever yet another stretch goal is close to being reached, a communal feeling of enthusiasm can be witnessed and is often contagious. In a polemic blog post about crowdfunding, Ian Bogost argued that we often do not even really want what we are funding—instead, backing a project is like "buying a ticket on the ride, reserving a front-row seat to the process . . . [f]or the experience of watching it succeed beyond expectations or to fail dramatically."[42] Perhaps acknowledging this feeling of spectacle as an important part of campaign momentum, Kickstarter now offers "Kickstarter Live": an option for the creators to include platform-supported live streaming onto their project site—to discuss the latest stretch goals, for example. Here, the project creator has a possibility to appear as a "show host" or even a celebrity who every night appears on the familiar channel to advertise, inform, answer questions, and

build community. As such, popular crowdfunding campaigns can be turned into shared spectacles that concentrate and celebrate the upcoming product.

Giving regular updates is a necessary part of successful campaigns,[43] and the pressure to provide live updates almost every day nicely highlights the heavy emphasis that well-planned crowdfunding projects now put on promotion during the campaign phase. In some cases, this might even affect the retail form of the product; it is easier to create new reveals and ongoing buzz with fragmented products—that is, gradually revealing new components and features. For example, many miniature board games such as *Conan* (Monolith, 2016) and *Zombicide: Black Plague* (CoolMiniOrNot, 2016) have been very successful on Kickstarter; an established strategy for these kinds of games is to expand the initial base game with new, campaign-exclusive miniatures, one by one, that once "unlocked" are free for all backers. As with preorder offers that offer exclusive DLC (downloadable content) levels to a game, a question arises whether these components and features were originally a part of the core game and were removed from it only to allow this kind of piecemeal sales strategy.

Continuing on the same note, Bogost compared crowdfunding to television shopping channels.[44] Typically, products are presented as special, campaign-exclusive offers that are available only for a short time, and often, both in crowdfunding and on shopping channels, there are special tie-in products that you can get as free "throw-in gifts"—but only if you "act fast!" As with crowdfunding, television shopping channel product demonstrations are often presented in front of an audience that gives applause and sets the tone, with the goal of convincing the viewer that "this truly is an especially good offer!" However, unlike the shopping channel, crowdfunding campaigns are speaking to an enthusiast audience that is specifically there because of their excitement for that particular product. As such, the negative connotation one might attach to shopping channel retail is largely absent within a backer community.

Backers as Agents of Retail

Crowdfunding backers are overwhelmingly people who have come together to support a campaign toward which they are very amicable or even enthusiastic. Many backers visit an open campaign page several times during a campaign and take part in the general (often enthusiastic) discussion surrounding the project. This has various consequences. First, existing backers often try to help in welcoming new backers and offering answers to frequently asked questions. Second, as most projects use stretch goals (i.e., the more money that is collected, the more content every backer gets), community members might get organized to entice new backers to join in. Third, members also sometimes persuade existing backers to raise their pledge or let themselves be persuaded

to do the same. During the campaign of *Conan* (Monolith, 2016), a miniature board game, new backers had endless questions about issues such as shipping, payments, and release dates. This soon resulted in existing backers addressing many of these questions for newcomers, substituting for Monolith's community manager when he was not available. Furthermore, backers openly discussed whether to spend more money on the project, or "up their pledge," to help reach upcoming stretch goals quicker. Many backers raised their pledge gradually as new stretch goals and optional add-ons were revealed, eventually declaring that they would go "all in"—that is, getting all the content there was to get (costing roughly $650, in contrast to the $90 asked for the base game).

Identifying this predisposition of the backers to aid in the sales process, it is now a common practice among crowdfunding campaigns to ask the existing backer community to spread the word in their social media channels, with the shared understanding that the more backers and collected funds there are, the more content everybody gets. Moreover, some crowdfunding campaigns, such as *Bloodstained*, *Exploding Kittens* (The Oatmeal, 2015), and *BATTLETECH* (Harebrained Schemes, 2018), have introduced special backer community "achievements." With *Bloodstained*, the community could earn achievements when different social media channels used by the campaign attracted a certain number of followers, when enough fan art was posted on Tumblr, when the campaign site was shared enough times, and so on. A certain amount of unlocked achievements would then yield bonuses for the campaign, such as wallpapers, new in-game costumes, and "silly" cheat codes for the game. Almost all the achievements were unlocked, and the strategy no doubt worked to great effect in both harnessing the fan community to spread the word (i.e., viral marketing) and getting fans enthusiastically engaged with the campaign.

Blurring the lines between producers and customers, creators of crowdfunding projects are often talented but "regular" people. Most game developers who choose to utilize crowdfunding are independent creators working alone or in small teams of one to five. They might be working from their homes and profess their fandom toward the same objects of admiration as the backers. However, Heikki Tyni describes how removing other value chain actors such as retailers and publishers from the production network can simply result in the developer having to take care of these tasks themselves, including various methods of trying to directly sell the product to customers.[45] Outsourcing functions of retail to backers might be invaluable and sometimes the only way to succeed. When project creators address the concerns of the backers—for example, through project community forums—they meet them on a peer-to-peer level, an access that is perceived as extremely valuable in modern marketing. One of the central ways to create long-term brand loyalty in contemporary social network markets is through social influence—for example, getting a customer to recommend a product to a friend. Here, game development, game

retail, and fan communities create new hybrid relationships exemplifying new, participatory forms of media consumption that aid in the selling of the game on producers' behalf.

Conclusions

As stated at the beginning of this chapter, we believe that studying the ways in which new participatory forms of interaction affect the media retail environment will help us better understand the logic of media and game culture more broadly. Crowdfunding is obviously not the only recent development challenging our notions of media retail. At the same time, many of the observations made in this chapter resonate with the wider transformation toward a service-based game industry model in which the nature of retail exchanges and the roles reserved for key actors, from developers to players, get significantly reevaluated.

Based on this study, crowdfunding actively works to decentralize some of the existing models of retail. At the same time, as game retail is moving away from the traditional stores, different phases in the production and distribution of video games adopt the characteristics of retail. First, crowdsourcing offers a *retailization of game development*. Instead of only focusing on delivering the game, the development team activities are now connected to the crowdfunding campaign that ultimately determines the sale of the product. Simultaneously, as the retailers and publishers are removed from the picture, game developers are asked to master many tasks traditionally associated with the retailers. Second, crowdfunding also results in the *retailization of consumption*: the campaigns rely heavily on the active role of consumers, reinventing backers as agents of retail who try to convince others to invest their money in the campaign they have backed.

Overall, it is relevant to ask what kind of games come out of this crowdfunding model. Arguing for more research focus on the economic models underlying digital games, Sebastian Deterding asks "how particular economic conditions enable, constrain, shape and support particular aesthetic forms of games."[46] As a production logic, the crowdfunding model has a clear set of characteristics, many of which shape the games produced through it. First, the model necessitates that the game idea is presold to a large enough crowd of customers before it can be made. This might mean, for example, choosing a concept that is known to be popular over an eccentric art game. Second, the project creators need to open up the production for cocreative participation by the backer community, which might both result in changes in the final game and encourage game concepts that support small outside contributions. Third, for feedback on development, crowdfunding creators largely rely on amateurs—that is, the backer community—instead of professionals, such

as a publisher. Finally, the pressure created by the expected transparency of crowdfunding projects and the backer community to finish the game within an acceptable time frame might result in games being increasingly released in unfinished forms (as opposed to negotiating more time with a publisher).

All in all, crowdfunding troubles the tendency of studying media retail in isolation from the creative sphere of production. As the most intriguing transformations appear to spawn from the interplay between retail and other phases in the life cycle of a game, it is difficult to argue for keeping these domains of research apart from each other.

Notes

1 Johan Hagberg, Malin Sundstrom, and Niklas Egels-Zandén, "The Digitalization of Retailing: An Exploratory Framework," *International Journal of Retail & Distribution Management* 44, no. 7 (2016): 694–712.

2 Heikki Tyni, "Double Duty: Crowdfunding and the Evolving Game Production Network," *Games and Culture* (2017); Anthony N. Smith, "The Backer–Developer Connection: Exploring Crowdfunding's Influence on Video Game Production," *New Media and Society* 17, no. 2 (2014): 198–214; Antonio José Planells, "Video Games and the Crowdfunding Ideology: From the Gamer-buyer to the Prosumer-investor," *Journal of Consumer Culture* 17, no. 3 (2015): 620–638.

3 "Global Games Market Report 2017," *Newzoo*, 2017, https://newzoo.com/insights/trend-reports/newzoo-global-games-market-report-2017-light-version/.

4 Tim Chang, "Gaming Will Save Us All," *Communications of the ACM* 53, no. 3 (Mar. 2010): 22–24; Olli Sotamaa and Tero Karppi, eds., *Games as Services—Final Report*, TRIM Research Reports 2, University of Tampere, Finland, http://tampub.uta.fi/bitstream/handle/10024/65772/978-951-44-8167-3.pdf.

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5 Henry Jenkins, *Convergence Culture: Where Old and New Media Collide* (New York: New York University Press, 2006).

6 Mia Consalvo, *Cheating: Gaining Advantage in Videogames* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 2007).

7 Olli Sotamaa, *The Player's Game: Towards Understanding Player Production among Computer Game Cultures* (PhD diss., University of Tampere, 2009).

8 L. Crane, interview with author, 10 Dec. 2015.

9 All the case study campaigns use Kickstarter (www.kickstarter.com), currently the most popular crowdfunding platform for game projects. Consecutively, this examination is limited to that platform.

10 The survey was conducted by researchers from the University of Tampere Game Research Lab, and it was open from 30 September to 15 November 2016 on SurveyGizmo.com. The link to the survey was shared on popular social media networks and in the comments sections of over twenty crowdfunding projects. After disqualified entries were removed, the dataset includes answers from altogether 426 crowdfunding campaign backers.

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12 Carly A. Kocurek, "Coin-Drop Capitalism: Economic Lessons from the Video Game Arcade," in *Before the Crash: An Anthology of Early Video Game History*, ed. Mark J. P. Wolf (Detroit, Mich.: Wayne State University Press, 2012), 195.
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23 *Global Games Market Research*.
24 *Global Games Market Research*.
25 Kerr, *Global Games*.
26 This practice has been criticized for directly driving the cost of retail game copies up. James Brightman, "Pre-owned Increases Cost of Games, Cannibalizes Industry, Says Dyack," *Gamesindustry*, 27 Mar. 2012, http://www.gamesindustry.biz/articles/2012-03-27-pre-owned-increases-cost-of-games-cannibalizes-industry-says-dyack.
27 In most cases, these exclusives later become available for all to purchase—for example, through a "Game of the Year" edition released half a year to a year later that collects all the scattered content in the same package.
28 Mike Williams, "GameStop Becomes a Publisher with GameTrust," *USgamer*, 18 Apr. 2016, http://www.usgamer.net/articles/gamestop-becomes-a-publisher-with-gametrust.
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30 Elizabeth Gerber and Julie Hui, "Crowdfunding: Motivations and Deterrents for Participation," *ACM Transactions on Computer-Human Interaction* 20 (2013): 14.
31 James Newman, *Best Before: Videogames, Supersession and Obsolescence* (Abingdon, Va.: Routledge, 2012), 68.
32 Newman, *Best Before*, 68.

33 Newman, 68–69.
34 Newman, 69.
35 Newman.
36 Newman, 11. See, for example, *Pier Solar and the Great Architects* (WaterMelon, 2010), which is a homebrew game released for Sega Genesis in 2010 and for Sega Dreamcast in 2015 (the latter via a crowdfunding campaign). Physical Dreamcast game discs were printed and shipped to backers.
37 Newman, *Best Before*, 68–69.
38 A constantly updated list by the authors tracking crowdfunded games released on Steam indicates that 79 games out of (total) 333 have received a physical release. Thirty-three of these are identified as a limited release.
39 *Yooka-Laylee* Kickstarter campaign page, 2015, https://www.kickstarter.com/projects/playtonic/yooka-laylee-a-3d-platformer-rare-vival.
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41 Paul Belleflamme, Thomas Lambert, and Armin Schwienbacher, "Crowdfunding: Tapping the Right Crowd," *Journal of Business Venturing* 29, no. 5 (2014): 585–609.
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