

Negotiating Participatory Culture in the New Media Environment: Auran and the Trainz Online Community – An (Im)possible Relation

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ABSTRACT

This paper offers an ethnographic account of participatory culture in the new media environment by describing an encounter with a virtual object: a 3D model of a steam locomotive designed to function within *Trainz*, a virtual railroad simulation. The encounter entangles us in the rapidly changing relationship between media consumers/fans and media producers in new media technologies, and foregrounds a transformation in the dynamics of cultural participation. These emerging dynamics demand that we rethink the relations between producers, consumers and media technologies. For example, are our understandings of fan culture as a choice between resistance to and cooptation by commercial imperatives enough to navigate these cultural networks? How do we respond to these fascinating objects? I argue that participatory culture is an event that is made and that we are responsible for our collusions in these enactments.

KEYWORDS

Computer games, participatory culture, fan community, industry, actor-networks, objects, ethnography

INTRODUCTION

In this paper I explore the making, emergence and circulation of a digital object: the P10, a 3D model of a steam locomotive that is designed to function within *Trainz*, a virtual railroad software simulation product. The P10 model emerges from a participatory culture network, a complex web of heterogeneous materials and practices that are in the process of reconfiguring the relations between producers and users, fan culture and corporate culture, in new media environments. In the stories that I tell and circulate about the P10 digital model I want to argue that it enacts and performs multiple realities. It engages and entangles us in the relations among these multiple realities. Participatory culture in new media environments is something that is to be made, built and constructed; it is not just out there in the social world waiting to be discovered and mapped. The topic and provocation of this paper is the question of what and how we contribute to this making?

Actor-network theory (ANT) provides a useful theoretical and methodological tool-kit for describing

the configuration and reconfiguration of the materials that constitute and construct the participatory culture relations and connections from which the P10 model emerges. The following brief overview cannot do justice to the nuances and complexities of ANT, but I hope to provide a sense of how it has shaped the telling of the ethnographic story that follows. ANT offers a resource for making stories about the performance and enactment of participatory culture. It is a tool for thinking and working through the implications, potentials, costs and exclusions of the heterogeneous materials that configure participatory culture in new media environments.

As a methodology ANT is relationally materialist. It asserts that all entities are configured in relation to other entities or actants. It follows then that things and people are not fixed. Nothing that enters in relations with other actants is in itself necessarily fixed. John Law describes this as a semiotics of “radical relationality” [12]. In pursuing the theoretical and empirical implications of this approach ANT works from a commitment that there is no essential or fundamental separation or division between the human and nonhuman, between us and our tools and technologies. ANT also tends to distinguish itself from social constructivism with the assertion that organisations, agents and patterns that we often may describe as social are constructed, made and performed from a diverse collection of materiality. As Bruno Latour puts it in *Pandora’s Hope* [9], “Yes, society is constructed, but not socially constructed” (198). What we call the social is a relational effect or outcome constructed through networks of diverse materials, both human and nonhuman. As a methodology ANT urges us to ‘follow the actors’ as they work to perform the construction of sociotechnical networks or assemblages, and to describe the heterogeneous materials from which they are composed [12, 13, 14]

Working from this framework in my ethnographic entanglement with the network of the *Trainz* project my descriptions tend to focus on the stuff, the materials from which the participatory culture relations emerging around *Trainz* are configured. In brief then, the analytical move that ANT allows me to make is to consider the participatory culture network I was engaged with as a particular configuration or patterned network of heterogeneous materials. John Law comments that it is the “analyst’s job, at least in part, to explore how those relations – and so the relations that they constitute – are brought into being” [12]. ANT focuses my attention on how the participatory culture network forming around *Trainz* is made or constructed.

In July 2002 I attended the National Model Railroad Association (NMRA) convention held in Ft Lauderdale, Florida. The annual convention is attended by model rail hobbyists, rail-fan enthusiasts and associated businesses and clubs from all over the world. The focus of the event is the extensive and detailed layouts and model replica locomotives that club members collaboratively work on and then display to fellow enthusiasts and members of the general public. Mixing with the enthusiasts are of course the major model railroad hobby companies demonstrating, promoting and selling product to the convention attendees. There can be significant overlap and blurring of the relations between the commercial and non-commercial as hobbyists sell replica models that they have painstakingly worked on, or trade and swap

with fellow enthusiasts. The rail-fan hobby world offers a strong example of what cultural and media studies often refer to as participatory culture. The layouts and models provide an occasion for the rail-fans to share their passion and considerable investment (often both financial and emotional) in all things train and rail: to share their knowledge and passion for a particular national and regional rail-line or a particular locomotive, or their skill and experience in creating the painstakingly detailed layouts. As I moved around the displays over the course of the convention I could overhear rail-fans sharing tips and tricks about carpentry, electronics and electrics, soldering, rail-lore, history and mythology. You could almost smell the rich tapestry and fabric of materials, practices, skills and knowledge that held this participatory culture event together. This strange mixture of commerce and hobbyist passion, energy and enthusiasm is very much at the core of participatory culture.

I had traveled to the convention from Brisbane, Australia in my employment as online community relations manager with Auran (www.auran.com), a game software development company. I was there with Tony Hilliam, the company's COO (and major investor), demonstrating and selling *Trainz*, a railroad simulation product that had been first released in December 2001. *Trainz* (<http://www.auran.com/trainz/>) enables users to create virtual 3D layouts and then drive authentically detailed locomotives through them [1].

Attending the convention and supporting Tony Hilliam and myself were members of the online *Trainz* fan community. We had arranged for Badtrash to fly to Ft Lauderdale from his home in Georgia so that he could assist us with both demonstrating and selling *Trainz*. Mutey, Bitstorm and Amethyst had made a four-hour-plus drive late at night, to arrive at the hotel in the early hours of the morning, together with PCs and monitors, to help out and participate in promoting *Trainz* to the model rail hobbyists and *Trainz* fans attending the convention. Over the course of the three days the volunteer fan team stood for hours in front of PCs, demonstrating, pointing out the various features of the product and fielding questions. The volunteers actively pursued sales, encouraging reluctant or wavering potential customers with comments like, "Look, this game is absolutely fantastic. I spend hours every week playing it. I just cannot get enough of it. And I'm not even paid to be here. I'm a member of the *Trainz* community, not employed by Auran at all". They would then generally invite the often overwhelmed person to take a seat while bringing up on the screen and demonstrating one of their favourite *Trainz* features, showing how easy and user-friendly it is to use the mouse driven interface to lay track in various configurations or create a mountain range and put in a tunnel. The demonstrations often ended with Badtrash or Mutey making the sale and passing the cash or credit card slip over to Tony or myself. It was a strange experience when I was able to take a moment, between sales pitches, to reflect on what was going on around me. The combination of jet lag, tiredness from long days on my feet at the show and being caught up in this mixture of model railroad DIY hobby culture, commercially driven business imperatives and *Trainz* fan enthusiasm and investment in the *Trainz* project was disturbing. It challenged and provoked me to provide an account of this event.

ENCOUNTERING A PARTICIPATORY CULTURE OBJECT

This sense of participatory culture reached something of a climax on the final day of the show, when another member of the *Trainz* fan community, Gumby, arrived to help out. Gumby is a quite well known and talented member of the third-party content creation community. Together with a small team of creators he was working on a series of locomotive models whose release was eagerly anticipated by many in the growing *Trainz* online community. Gumby was also recognised as an opinion leader by both Auran and many members of the community. Shortly after arriving at the show and introducing himself, Gumby handed me a CD, prompting, "take a look, you've got to load this, I think you'll be impressed". I recall handing the CD to Bitstorm who loaded it with the comment, "Oh yeah, I saw that this baby had gone up on Download Station". "There she is," announced Badtrash, and I heard a few wows and noises of appreciation from the rail fans clustered around the monitors. One elderly man I had been discussing the features and merits of *Trainz* with (we had worked out that his PC really wouldn't support *Trainz*) tapped me on the shoulder, pointed at the screen and said "I thought you said *Trainz* didn't have steam, that P10 is a beautiful beast, if it has steam then I want a copy". After paying the \$40 for his copy of *Trainz* and writing down our recommendation for upgrading his PC hardware (which would set him back another good \$100) the man stood back for a half-hour or so with a growing crowd of appreciative on-lookers glued to the image of the P10 steamer chugging around a layout up on the screen. Comments from on-lookers included "Wow, look it's got steam, look Dad I want one", and "Quick go get Joe from the club, he's working the layout, he's just gotta see this".

It was quite a moment. A digital object (a 3D mesh object, wrapped in textures with a series of animation and sound effects attached to it) supported by the *Trainz* core program code base and available from Auran's *Trainz* website, Download Station, as a free download contributed by a team of fan content creators was, at that moment, generating or the focus of rail-fan awe and delight. The object up on the screen was caught up in a shared expression of rail-fan emotional investment. In fact, the very commercial success of *Trainz* relied, at least in part, on the extent to which this niche game software product could become a part of and tap into rail-fans' strong emotional, affective investment in all things train and rail. I recall Tony Hilliam whispering as he passed by, completing another sale, "wish we had steam from the start of the show, would probably have got us a good few more sales". He requested that we turn up the speakers volume, so the steam sound-effects would grab the attention and maybe sales. This mixing of technologies, affective investment, capital investment, commerce, DIY practices and skills and histories blurred the boundaries among actants, historical periods and enterprises. Who was the producer and who the consumer here, who the fan and who the corporate agent? Was this a moment best accounted for as some kind of group technological fetishism, reveling in the effects and excesses of expensive early 21st century PC technology? The P10 engaged us in an encounter with a carefully detailed, replica model from the steam era. It is an object that mixes materials, different periods, practices and stories. There is also something rather

excessive about the P10.

Looking up at the screen, I had to acknowledge that the P10 steam locomotive was indeed a magnificent object, as it chugged along across a bridge, against a backdrop of a stunning effect of the setting sun. There was a moment of shared pride in being involved in the *Trainz* project, a participant who had contributed towards the making of this moment. And yet I was simultaneously aware of the very tenuous and fragile web or network of materials, relations and compromises from which the P10 emerged.

THEORISING PARTICIPATORY CULTURE

If we even briefly follow the trajectory of the P10 we quickly become entangled in the rapidly changing relations among media consumers and producers, as facilitated by new media technologies. These shifting relations are often described as participatory culture. This term can be traced back to the subtitle of Henry Jenkins's influential 1992 study, *Textual Poachers* [6]. Through a series of ethnographic accounts of media fans' "troubled relationship to the mass media and consumer capitalism" (1) Jenkins foregrounds the activity of media fans in appropriating and reworking the cultural resources of commercial culture according to alternative and at times even potentially resistant agendas. Jenkins's study provides an important strategic and accessible intervention into assumptions about media fans as mindless, passive consumers. However, Jenkins [6] is careful not to over-estimate the effective resistance of the fan practices, acknowledging that:

fans operate from a position of cultural marginality and social weakness. Like other popular readers, fans lack direct access to the means of commercial cultural production and have only the most limited resources with which to influence entertainment industry's decisions. Fans must beg with the networks to keep their favourite shows on the air, must lobby producers to provide desired plot developments or to protect the integrity of favourite characters. Within the cultural economy, fans are peasants, not proprietors, a recognition which must contextualise our celebration of strategies of popular resistance (27).

Here Jenkins reminds us that fans are often effectively denied access to the economic control and influence that the power of ownership provides in the culture industries.

At the time, Jenkins's work tended to be structured by an opposition that valorises the fan mode of 'poaching' production as distinct from industrial, commercial 'official' production. For example, in the conclusion of *Textual Poachers* [6] he asserts that "Fandom generates systems of distribution that reject profit and broaden access to its creative works" (280). However, Jenkins runs into difficulty when explaining the emergence of "semi-professional publishers of zines and distributors of filktapes", evaluating this trend as "not necessarily for the better". He moves quickly to incorporate these developments back into the communal, valorised ethic of fandom with the comment that "these companies originate within the fan community and reflect a desire to achieve a better circulation of its cultural products"

(280).

Here Jenkins is uneasy with the potential reconfiguration of boundaries between fandom and official, commercial, corporate culture. This emerging dynamic does not fit easily within much of his placing fandom in an oppositional stance towards commercial culture. It does not sit easily within the frameworks of Cultural Studies' often all too predictable political posturing. The fans are fraternising with the enemy or even going commercial themselves, what is to be done! Of course, I'm overstating Jenkins's position here, but it certainly indicates an anxiety that traverses much academic engagement with fan and consumer practices. What happens and what should our response be when we encounter these quasi-objects emerging from participatory culture dynamics that are blurring the boundaries between the commercial or the corporate and the fan or the DIY hobbyist? Is this a case of rampant capital extending its networks and coopting fandom to its commercial ends?

The *Trainz* demonstration suggests that the landscape of participatory culture has moved on since 1992. In a series of recent essays Jenkins [4, 5] addresses the rapidly shifting and unstable terrain of participatory culture in the new media environment. In "Interactive Audiences? The 'Collective Intelligence' of Media Fans" [4] Jenkins takes up the work of Pierre Lévy [16, 17] to think through the transformed relations among interactive audiences and media industries. Jenkins makes the important point that in working our way through the various implications of these transformations, "rather than talking about interactive technologies, we should document the interactions that occur amongst media consumers, between media consumers and media texts, and between media consumers and media producers". I would add that it is difficult to separate out interactive technologies from what Jenkins calls consumers and producers. In fact, as I will suggest over the course of this paper, these technologies are currently making it increasingly difficult to assume that we know where those boundaries are. But I don't see Jenkins as asserting some tired old opposition between say theory and empirical practice, or the real of ethnographic field work as against the distance of 'just doing theory'. There is too much theory out there in the field and too much practice in the theoretical moment to be raising that objection. I see him as calling us to offer up accounts, in detail, of our encounters and entanglements in the networks of participatory culture. My research aims to contribute to this undertaking.

In the essay Jenkins [4] develops an understanding of participatory culture in which a combination of three things is fundamentally altering the relations between media consumers and producers: the new media tools and technologies with which consumers appropriate, rework and recirculate media content; DIY media production cultures which shape how consumers deploy and engage with these technologies; and economic trends favouring "horizontally integrated media conglomerates". Jenkins is seeking to develop an approach for relating with these transformations which avoids the oppositional logic of traditional audience studies which sees consumers as either resisting or coopted by the media industries. Following Lévy,

Jenkins suggests that the participatory “knowledge” cultures emerging through the uses of Internet technologies “never fully escape the influence of the commodity culture”. But in turn, the operations of commodity culture will be influenced and altered by the emerging participatory cultures. Jenkins briefly describes examples of the changing relations in which producer and media companies actively enlist the participation of end user consumers in the production, distribution and marketing of media content. He acknowledges that these initiatives are often grounded in peer-to-peer, relationship or viral marketing models, but suggests that the involvement of fans in producing add-on content in the games industry indicates an important extension of consumer participation. *The Sims* is an often-cited example of this. Jenkins [4] also recognises that these participatory trends of increasing cooperation, collaboration and consultation raise crucial questions and problems around intellectual property. Will “the legal structures of the old commodity culture” ultimately limit and control the scope of participatory culture? He asks, “How far will media companies be willing to go to remain in charge of their content or to surf the information flow?”

Are we then back with the problematic of resistance or cooptation? In conclusion, Jenkins [4] comments that in an environment in which users regularly appropriate and recirculate media products, the rhetoric of opposition and cooptation is not all that helpful. Whilst recognising that there are no doubt moments of cooptation when these cultures collaborate directly with commercial cultures, there are also opportunities and potential to “make commercial culture more responsive to consumers”. The difficulty apparent here is that whilst trying to avoid that rhetoric of resistance or cooptation, Jenkins still sees the commercial, corporate and the end-user as rather separate and distinct entities. Let’s move on a little further with the P10 and see where it takes us.

AURAN & THE TRAINZ FANS

First, perhaps I should briefly account for how I happened to be encountering the P10 and how it has managed to become attached to a research paper. My research relationship with Auran goes back to mid 1997. I had decided to embark on a PhD project that eventually became an ethnographic study of the rapidly changing relationships and emerging participatory culture dynamics among PC game development companies, game publishers and online gamer fans. Auran agreed to participate in my research, providing me with regular access to employees for interviews. Without this access the particular encounter I’m seeking to describe would no doubt have been very different. Of course the terms and conditions of this access had to be negotiated and re-negotiated on a regular basis. For example, my research relationship was and continues to be regulated by the terms of a non-disclosure agreement. The conditions of this access changed significantly in June 2000 when Auran’s CEO, Greg Lane, offered me a position as online community development manager, suggesting that they had a project in mind that from the outset would involve encouraging an extensive, online fan community to form around the ongoing development of the product. Lane believed that the commercial success and viability of the game product that became *Trainz* would require the formation and growth of an active and vibrant online fan community that would both actively promote the

product and create content—extensions and additions to the game software. My role was to facilitate and manage Auran’s relationship with the online fan groups that form around game titles, particularly *Trainz*. From the very early stages of the development process we were committed to directly involving the end-user train sim and rail-fan community in the design process. In August 2000, Auran launched the *Trainz* website, which included a forum through which we actively engaged in an open-ended, ongoing dialogue with the fan community participants about various design features and functionality. In the space of this paper I am unable to cover in any detail the early exchanges and dialogues that occurred on the forum and extended on occasion to emails, telephone discussions and in some cases face to face meetings [1]. However, the feedback received from members of the community has had a direct influence on many areas of the game design direction. This dynamic, participatory design relationship continues, with members of the *Trainz* fan community being involved in ongoing beta-testing and feedback into the development and refinement of the *Trainz* product. For example, the next module to be released in the *Trainz* product line, *Yardmaster*, is currently the focus of extensive exchanges between the Auran development team and the fan community. However, the level of access to this dialogue does vary considerably across the community. Some members of the community will be selected to participate in the beta test process and thereby have more extensive access privileges to the development team and early versions of the software (including direct email contact from time to time with individual programmers, and access to password protected forum and chat areas where the Auran development team will participate more regularly than on the general, open forum areas). I will return to this question and problem of access rights and privileges in a moment.

Let’s head back to our encounter with the P10 steam locomotive. Tony Hilliam and I were confronting some initial difficulty and confusion in explaining to the rail-fans lining up to purchase a copy of *Trainz*, that while, yes that was a steam loco up there on the screen, no it was not actually included in the physical package that they were purchasing (i.e. it was not included on the CD). We explained that the P10 had been created by members of the *Trainz* community, a group of content creators that recently made it available for the enjoyment of other *Trainz* users by uploading it to the Auran *Trainz* web site. The version of *Trainz* that was available for purchase at the convention stand and from the *Trainz* web site had been significantly modified and updated since the first release of the community edition back in December 2001. Based on feedback and requests from the *Trainz* community the development team, the ‘brew crew’, made modifications and added features, including fixing bugs and performance problems, that had been identified after the initial release. A week prior to the NMRA show a major update for *Trainz* had been released for download from the web site. The update, Service Pack 3, took *Trainz* to v1.3 and sought to address a range of outstanding issues and introduce a range of new functionality that had required an overhaul and reworking of the *Trainz* code-base. Auran had committed considerable resources to this reworking and extension of *Trainz*; the programmers and artists had worked incredibly long hours over a two month period, particularly in the immediate weeks leading up to the

release. The code base overhaul had then required many of the art assets (such as the locomotive and rolling stock models) to be up dated so that they would work with the new version. This update process was, in part, aimed to reposition *Trainz* to provide support for a more user-friendly and closer integration of third-party fan created content with the broader *Trainz* core product, including the Auran web site distribution processes (both Download Station and the online e-commerce facilities). However, the circumstances leading up to its release also introduced tensions and conflicts into Auran's relationship with the third-party content creators and among segments of the fan content creators.

It had been a tense few months at Auran leading up to the release of service pack 3. The team was working in a very uncertain environment. Some Auran staff felt that Service Pack 3 was not so much an expansion of *Trainz* as the introduction of features the premature first release should have had all along. They were well aware of the importance of getting the product to market, and that at some point revenue needed to be generated that at least covered the costs incurred in paying their salaries and providing the technological tools, hardware and general infrastructure and resources. Throughout the first half of 2002 *Trainz* had not generated the revenue that Auran anticipated, either from online sales or traditional in-store retail. There remained a strong belief and faith in the *Trainz* project by many at Auran, although some would from time to time question the overall direction and viability of a niche product that was proving somewhat difficult to describe to potential publishers and distributors in terms of conventional, saleable game product. Unfortunately *Trainz* was running into sales, marketing and distribution difficulties that were in part an outcome of a problematic relationship with the publisher. There were significant delays in the retail release of *Trainz* in Europe. When they did finally occur, the releases had been preceded by very little in the way of a marketing campaign to build any substantial awareness of the product. This in turn led to reluctance on the part of major game retail chains to stock *Trainz* in significant quantities. In fact, one of the more successful retail launch events was organised by a group of *Trainz* fans in Copenhagen working in collaboration with the Scandinavian distributor. This difficult business situation resulted in Auran receiving numerous emails from potential customers describing their inability to locate copies of *Trainz* in their local software shops or varying degrees of frustration through to expressions of hostility and anger regarding the release delays in Australia and throughout Europe (particularly the UK). Then when *Trainz* was finally released in Europe, for a range of reasons relating to the commercial complexities of the publishing and distribution relationships, it was not the latest v1.3 and neither could it be immediately upgraded to v1.3 by downloading the service pack from Auran's web site. In brief then, initial *Trainz* sales were not meeting the levels necessary to support it as a viable commercial concern, at least not in the short term.

One immediate impact of the low sales was the loss of some jobs at Auran. For example, a fairly large web and online marketing team had been established to support the anticipated growth of both the *Trainz* community and e-commerce transactions from sales of a series of planned add-on products and expansion modules. In anticipation of an at least moderately successful

retail and online e-commerce launch Auran's plans included extending the support for the *Trainz* third party content creators, offering them opportunities for the commercial release of their content, through both Auran's e-commerce systems and traditional retail distribution, as add-on CD pack collections. However, low sales combined with the marketing and distribution difficulties made it difficult to justify or support this extension in the short term. The fate of *Trainz* very much hung in the balance. But the passionate support of the growing *Trainz* online community encouraged Auran's senior management and primary investor to move ahead with plans to expand from the core *Trainz* product release. For example, a series of promotional activities undertaken by groups of *Trainz* fans attending model rail club meetings and larger model rail exhibitions and conventions convinced us that *Trainz* may still have strong potential to become a successful product. These fan driven promotional activities were not originally initiated by Auran and developed from approaches made by individuals and groups wanting to assist with spreading the awareness and interest in *Trainz*. We were somewhat surprised by the level of involvement that some fans sought in their efforts to participate in promoting *Trainz*.

Auran was confronting difficulty in moving ahead with plans for supporting, encouraging and enlisting the third-party content creators. Uncertainty around the future direction of *Trainz* meant that we did not want to make further commitments to third-party creators that we would be unable to follow through on. Via the *Trainz* forums, emails and phone calls with a number of the third-party content creators, Auran had discussed plans and initiatives to support their efforts. Time and again we had stated our commitment and that Auran fundamentally believed their endeavours were crucial for the success of *Trainz*. The expectations raised by these dialogues were at the time of the NMRA convention leading to tensions with some third-party creators who had concerns that Auran was now not following through on the commitments. On the final day of the NMRA convention Gumby raised these issues directly with me, indicating that they were increasingly becoming a problem and source of conflict within the content creator community. Gumby pointed out that many of the content creators felt that they were a part of Auran and that the recent falling away of our involvement with the community was leading to a growing sense of unease and uncertainty. He was seeking assurances that Auran remained committed, and firm details on just when the third party creator support plans would be implemented. After all Gumby and a small team of third-party creators had invested a lot of time and energy to creating models that they intended releasing for sale on either their own web site or Auran's e-commerce system. He indicated that a perceived lack of clarity and communication from Auran on the matter was supporting speculation that we had entered into special, exclusive, commercial arrangements with some content creator groups, providing them with access to technical information and future design and product direction plans that the wider fan creator community was being excluded from. The fact that some members of the third-party content creator community were also participants in the *Trainz* beta-test program while others were not no doubt contributed to these emerging conflicts. Confusion and contention about the need for third party creators to update their

content in compliance with the *Trainz* v1.3 release was also adding to the tensions and uncertainties traversing the *Trainz* content-creation community at the time.

This description is excessive and colludes in a performance of Auran as a commercial enterprise. Is academic research practice coopted at this point by commercial, entrepreneurial imperatives? Is it perhaps a case of researcher 'gone native' as business manager? But these networks of relations are not something which stands in the way of participatory culture. They are precisely what participatory culture emerges from. From the outset, participatory culture is caught up in business strategies and articulated to a complex series of negotiations, publishing and distribution contracts, terms and conditions of licenses, business deals and less clearly defined or formulated understandings, affective investments and undertakings such as those which had emerged with Auran and the *Trainz* community.

BUILDING THE P10 & BRINGING STEAM TO TRAINZ

One of the most frequent requests from participants in the *Trainz* forum was for steam. On initial release *Trainz* did not include or support the creation of steam locomotives, concentrating on diesels and electrics. The development team decided quite early that within the scheduled time-frame for bringing *Trainz* to market, and the programming and art resources available, it was not feasible to include steam with the first release. The problem was not in generating the required art assets (the 3D mesh model, textures and various animation effects for creating a virtual steam model). The challenge was more the coding problem involved in accurately simulating physics involved in the operation of a steam locomotive. However, the possibility was raised of commencing the code work needed for steam models, then releasing this material and associated guidelines to third-party content creators who could then create the art and animation assets. In effect, this plan involved out-sourcing the introduction of steam to the fan content creation community. Auran programmers and graphic artists would then help the third-party creators to integrate and import the steam models into the core *Trainz* program. Preliminary discussions along these lines were entered into between Auran and third-party content groups, to the extent that one group in particular felt that Auran had undertaken to provide them with the code and technical details needed. This group planned to commercialise the locomotive models, selling them either independently on their own web site or through Auran. Unfortunately, the 2002 lead-up to the release of the service pack 3 update had created delays and obstacles for Auran's plans to extend support for third-party creators. Further, we were aware that the core code changes involved in Service Pack 3 would have a considerable impact on the methods in which content such as models would be imported into and function within the core *Trainz* program. We did not want to encourage the third-party creators to do considerable work that they might well need to rework from the ground up after v1.3. As I said, this was a difficult and tense period in Auran's relationship with some segments of the third-party content creators. Auran had no support for the steam, but the requests for it were growing all the time.

A crucial aspect of the third-party content creation process is the terms and conditions if you like of how

the third-party content objects access or integrate with the core *Trainz* program. The various elements that constitute a *Trainz* object need to be carefully and often strictly prepared and packaged according to third-party content guidelines released by Auran. The latest version of the Content Creation Procedures document runs to some 100 pages. A contentious issue throughout 2002 was the introduction of a new *Trainz* asset identification system which required third-party creators to update all of their pre v1.3 content to ensure that it could be identified by and thereby function with the new *Trainz* version. An aim of this change is to simplify the process of distributing and installing custom content by integrating the distribution of custom content closely and seamlessly with the core *Trainz* application platform. The issues surrounding what level of detail about the core *Trainz* program update would be released to the content creation community, to whom it would be released and within what time frame proved to be a continuing source of conflict and tension.

The P10 emerged from a collaborative effort led by community member Marlboro, which crossed over a number of different steam projects being pursued by various individuals. The steam creators shared knowledge and skills about using various 3D modelling software tools, such as Discreet's gmax (<http://www.discreet.com/products/gmax/>). For example, progress towards integrating a range of animation effects associated with steam into *Trainz* was very much the outcome of a collaborative, experimentation, trial-and-error approach, with regular updates on the results being shared amongst the creators. A detailed account of the technical skill and DIY software practices involved in the process of creating the P10 is beyond the ambit of this paper. But it must be acknowledged that these collaborative, 3D modeling development skills are a fundamental part of the *Trainz* participatory culture network.

Other creators and members of the community closely followed the forum content creation threads with great interest and anticipation that steam was finally coming to *Trainz*. The content creators would regularly (often daily) post work in progress reports including preview screenshots and examples. The response to Prowler901's update of a steam project included: "OMG 🤖 Prowler901! That's great!" and "Prowler: You are my new God. I worship you. Seriously, though, I am most impressed. Keep us steam lovers posted, OK? Thanks!" UserRo commented, "🤖 W this place is getting more addictive in every day [drool icon]". The updates and previews provided an opportunity to perform and celebrate participatory community, just as the NMRA show was a performance of train and rail fan enthusiasm and passion.


The content creation forum threads continued throughout May with further updates and requests for assistance and sharing of knowledge around problems as they were encountered. Marlboro, the lead creator in the P10 project, posted requests for assistance with sourcing top and front views of the locomotive so that he could get the model details correct. Throughout this process individuals such as Prowler and Marlboro were moving well ahead of the technical details released by Auran on the implementation of the animation effects required for the overall steam locomotive effect. Narrowgauge

posted “what are the CCG [Content Creation Guidelines] naming guidelines . . . Not happy Auran!”. At that point in time, Content Creation Guidelines had not been updated with the naming conventions required for the animation effects to be successfully imported into the *Trainz* program. Marlboro continued moving ahead with his effort to introduce the steam locomotive to *Trainz*, running into problems and often resolving them with the assistance and input from other members of the content creation community.

In an effort to assist Marlboro with completing the model by adding a white smoke effect Magicland posted a request for further details from Auran: “He really is doing an excellent job on it. Now if we could just get some white smoke outta Auran”. Another community member, cbowes, posted a follow-up, “I was thinking about the white smoke, too. I expect Auran is contemplating how to handle that when they fully support steam. I hope! I hope”. On 9 June, after a further series of exchanges that involved the sharing of information and resolving outstanding problems, Marlboro announced that “she’s done”. Then on 17 June he posted that the P10 was finally ready to upload.

Now, how would the P10 be distributed and made available to the wider *Trainz* user community for download? Marlboro raised this question in a post, contemplating the possibility of holding it back and distributing on a CD together with other steam locomotives that he was working on. Should it be payware or freeware? Should it be uploaded to Auran’s download station or released via a download on his own website? Marlboro raised concerns about how the impending Service Pack 3 upgrade release may impact on the locomotive’s integration with *Trainz* and whether the new version of Custom Dispatcher could be used to package the P10 for upload to the *Trainz* web site Download Station and wider distribution. Marlboro mentions that he would like to apply for “official content” status and is concerned that any pre-release of the model may impact negatively in some way on his involvement in Auran’s Official Content Creation program. The P10 poses problems about access to Auran and the potential terms and conditions of that access. It is also potentially subject to legal terms and conditions, such as license agreements Marlboro would be accepting should he upload the P10 to Auran’s Download Station. Up to this point, this moment, there has been a reasonably free flow of information, ideas, technical details, specifications and drawing plans, textures, model packages, photographs, forum posts, emails, and the exchange of various working versions of the model in progress, packed up in a zip file and transferred among the collaborators. This digital artefact has been the subject of considerable communication. This communication itself has been enabled, put into motion and movement, by the information architecture of the Internet. But at this juncture there is a moment of hesitation. How should the P10 should now be put into distribution? What are the implications of how it continues its journey? Marlboro poses the question, “now what, wait and finish 100% or post the beta as is?” Now what indeed.

The response to this juncture was a series of posts urging Marlboro to release the P10. Sg1 exclaimed, “Post it! Post it! Post it!” Vongarv quickly followed

with “Send her up! I need steam ”. Then later on the 17th Marlboro announced that the Union Pacific P10 has been uploaded to Auran. From this point on the P10 was in the hands of Auran, awaiting approval from the web development team prior to being made available for general distribution. While waiting for this Marlboro moved ahead with previewing other versions of his core steam model to much enthusiasm, praise and encouragement. Vongarv commented, “Marl, PRR 5038 looks great!


When these babies hit the download station it’s going to be a busy day for the Auran server” (21 June 2002).


Due to the delay at Auran’s end with releasing the P10, other members of the community offered to host the model on their *Trainz* fan sites. The reason for the delay was the work on Service Pack 3 and associated updates to Download Station. After the release of the Service Pack 3 update, Marlboro needed to update the P10 model to ensure that it was complaint and would function with the new *Trainz* v1.3. New features that Auran included with Service Pack 3 (based on feedback received directly from third-party creators and closely following forum threads such as the series discussing the challenge of creating steam locomotives) included simplifying the process of attaching sound effects and, for the steam creators in particular, adding steam animation emission points and the ability to support continuous smoke coming from the stack. Marlboro reworked his models to incorporate the new features. Again, the community collaborated on how precisely to go about implementing the new features as the Auran documentation was somewhat confusing and lacking detail on some points.

The problem was that the third party creators were again moving ahead with modifying their models before Auran had released the new Content Creation Guidelines support documentation. Access to information was yet again emerging as a key issue in the negotiation of relations in this emerging participatory culture network. Prowler, Marlboro and many of the other steam creators shared ideas and suggestions on how to utilise the new features, for example changing the colour of the smoke effects. Brendan, one of the Auran *Trainz* team programmers, posted a response with the details required to resolve the problem of changing the colour of the smoke effects. Marlboro quickly responded that the details posted had assisted him with resolving the problem. Auran staff had been following with much interest the fan creators’ endeavours, but all of the development team’s resources were fully committed to the delayed Service Pack 3 release. Nevertheless, despite this heavy workload, individual team members would regularly take it upon themselves to participate in e-mail and chat dialogues assisting content creators with information and suggestions about how to most effectively integrate their models with the *Trainz* program. Some *Trainz* team members would do this in their own time. This again raised the dilemma of who received the access to Auran technical assistance and on what terms and conditions. Those receiving such assistance were generally participating in the *Trainz* beta test program under the conditions of a non-disclosure agreement.

On 19 July 2002 the Service Pack 3 updated version of the P10 (with the new sound, steam and smoke effects)

was released via Auran's Download Station. The post from Bobo88, announcing that the locomotive was now available, acknowledged that the model was the outcome of a collaborative effort. The response from the wider *Trainz* fan community to the release announcement included:

"Man I LOVE the Westinghouse pump at rest! And the way it starts up! And the wooo-v  oooooooo!!!! DOWNLOAD THIS NOW!!!!!" from Charlie;

"am amazed Guys. The pictures don't do her justice. She is a fine scale model. I was getting great  nce with a celeron 400. You set a high mark" from Rustic1;

Jetstreamsky commented, "Totally amazing, what a wonderful sight and sound. Just had six of these beasts running round a layout, a real joy. Well done to all those involved in figuring all this out, the door is truly open now for some fine steam additions."

As Jetstreamsky pointed out in his post, the collaborative effort involved in working out how to bring steam locomotives to *Trainz* opened the way for others to add to the growing collection of steam locomotive content available to download. A series of steam locomotives have now been created by community members including Jetstreamsky, Sdark, Austin316hockey, Jonny211 and others. In September 2002, Strat released the much anticipated Union Pacific Bigboy steam locomotive from his website as payware.

THE (IM)POSSIBILITY OF PARTICIPATORY CULTURE

In this brief account of the P10 and the collaborative, participatory culture networks through which it emerges and circulates I hope to have conveyed a sense of what Scott Lash [7] has recently described as the socio-technical ties or bonds that form around and are mobilised by these objects (20). The movement and circulation of the P10 works to reconfigure the boundaries between actants and practices that we commonly label 'consumer', 'producer', 'corporate business', 'academic researcher' and 'fan'. The interesting question then becomes one of how we relate and respond to these mediatic objects. What can we do with them, where do they take us and in what relations do they entangle us? Lash comments that these three dimensional, tactile objects raise important implications and challenges for cultural and media studies: "the subject matter of cultural studies may change: it would no longer be texts or narratives, or even signs or audiences or authors. The subject matter of cultural studies would become objects" (125).

Actor-network theorist Bruno Latour [10] argues that these quasi-objects mix up ontologies. They are social and fabricated and collective, forcing us "to think anew the role of objects in the construction of collectivities" (55). When we follow the movement of these objects they "appear to us sometimes as a thing, sometimes as a narrative, sometimes as a social bond, without ever being reduced to a mere being" (89). Objects such as the P10 "are collective because they attach us to one another, because they circulate in our hands and define our social bond by their very circulation. They are discursive, however; they are narrated, historical, passionate, and peopled with actants of

autonomous forms. They are unstable and hazardous, existential, and never forget Being" (89). Latour's [8, 9, 10] actor-network methodology offers us a valuable resource and tool-set for tracing and following the movements of objects such as the P10 digital model and the construction of collectivities such as the *Trainz* participatory culture network. However, as we play in the networks of these emerging participatory cultures, what response do we have to those power plays directed at untangling the networks, at defining these objects as objects of exchange? I concur with Lash that the net-face of our encounters with these objects raises important challenges for our critical practices, for the value of critique. How do our moments of critical practice come face-to-face with this material that I am privileged to have access to? How do we account for and respond to this access?

In *Critique of Information* Lash [7] argues that in informational networks that are stretching productivity relations new constellations of power are emerging that are fundamentally about rights of access and intellectual property. The terms and conditions of access to these networks and the circulation of informational objects whose production are often outsourced are increasingly regulated by a rapidly broadening and expanding regime of intellectual property (3-10; 22-25). He suggests that critique and the critic can no longer assume a stance that is exterior or transcendental to the informational order. We must connect or articulate to these informational actor-networks by insisting on additivity, on the supplement. In a radically empiricist gesture we must "add on" (xii; 192-93). This mode of practice, for Lash, opens the modest possibility of contributing to the reconfiguring of informational objects and their boundaries and to "reworking the boundaries of the proprietary and non-proprietary (xii; also see 192-201). According to Lash "what was the ideological 'real', or 'instance' becomes an object space, a space of technology. Political and cultural struggle now must be fought out in this immanent space" (128).

Lash's suggestion that we participate in the reconfiguration of informational objects raises challenging methodological questions that may take us beyond ANT and towards a rather different theoretical economy. Perhaps ANT works all too well as a methodology. Out in the field researchers tend to find exactly what they are looking for, complex sociotechnical networks of heterogeneous materials that constitute organisations such as laboratories, business enterprises, military projects, design studios and game development projects. Recent work by John Law and other theorists raises important questions about the performativity of our methodological tools. Our ethnographic descriptions do not work in the mode of traditional empirical realism. Ethnographic stories do not just report on a world discovered and encountered out there, but participate directly in the performance and enactment of that world. What are the uptakes of this performative dimension of research method? Law argues that descriptions and analysis in terms of actor networks may work to reinforce an increasingly dominant, indeed even hegemonic, network metaphor mobilised strategically to entrench functionalist, managerial ways of making the world. Our descriptions help to bring into being what they describe. Briefly then, stories grounded in an actor-

network methodology may well collude with and help to reproduce rather functional, project orientated and managerial ways of constructing the world [11, 12, 15]. For example, both my research and work colludes with Auran's efforts to manage collaborative relations with the *Trainz* fan community. In my relationship with Auran I have assisted with the development of tools, skills and practices to more effectively enlist and manage fan content creation communities around Auran's software development projects. This functional understanding of the relations between entities tends towards a centred and controlled project aimed at working towards a singular strategic goal. As Law warns, "what we're often doing, *is buying into and adding strength to a functional version of relationality*. One that is, to say it quickly, managerialist" and I would add, all too often entrepreneurial [12].

I would like to broaden the question of response and accountability in this space that Latour, Lash and Law describe. There is something about the gift of the P10 that is excessive to both the calculations of intellectual property rights, the functionality involved in the performance of enterprise and the accounts of critical practice. This surplus or supplement is apparent in the moment at the NMRA show in which we participated in a shared passionate immersion in the P10, transfixed in our idiotic, celebratory enjoyment of the Thing as it appeared on the screen. It is also apparent in the celebratory drool events that accompanied the previews and release of the P10 to the *Trainz* fan community. This excessive presence of the P10 as Thing is not an oppositional moment to the commercial. It is not a use value being opposed to exchange value for example. For example, the drool icons that the *Trainz* community members often use on the forum to indicate their excessive enjoyment are regularly referred to as drool™ or drool mop™. It is more a constitutive surplus, the condition of possibility for the emergence of participatory culture and the subjectivity of participatory culture. But it is simultaneously the fracture in participatory culture that marks the inherent impossibility of the relations among corporate capital and fan DIY practice. It is this surplus enjoyment that corporate capital would like to get rid of or at least control and regulate through the assertion and expansion of intellectual property. But isn't this excess, this fetish if you like, simply a surplus that has been coopted and commercialised by capital? Cooption relies on an assumption of separation and distinction. This excessive, almost perverse enjoyment in the reconfiguration of the boundaries and relations between producer and consumer, the fun of playing in the networks of informational capitalism, is a constitutive condition that outgrows and eludes the controlling grasp. It is an obscene, excessive supplement that sustains the day to day operations of participatory culture in the networks of informational capitalism, that sticks to objects and which we can never finally get rid of or account for. This fantasy scene of the supplementary enjoyment guarantees the consistency of the socio-ideological network that is participatory culture and yet cannot be integrated into its symbolic structure. The passionate attachments to the P10 both sustain and overrun the controls of power; this obscene Thing is not an intruding element that we can easily discount. We may want to overlook it, but it is the stuff, the strange materiality that interrupts the networks. It is the movement of this

disturbing object / Thing between the proprietary and non-proprietary that we are mutually responsible and accountable for. At this juncture I am mobilising the work of Slavoj Žižek to rework and reconfigure our encounter with the P10 as object; moving from the space of the ontological object towards a fascination with the Thing [18, 19, 20, 21, 22].

In that moment at the convention in which I was thoroughly fascinated by and caught up in this enjoyment I can recall Badtrash gaining my attention with the interruption, "wow man, good stuff for the PhD don't you think", accompanied by a disturbing, disruptive grin. Good stuff indeed. His comment reminded me of similar moments at Auran in management team meetings, when I was thoroughly enjoying my participation in shaping corporate tactics, for example engaging in debates and discussion surrounding management of our relations with the *Trainz's* fans. Auran's CEO, Greg Lane, would from time to time glance over, catching me out in my enjoyment, and say something like, "good material for the PhD don't you think. Are you getting it all down?"

Moving beyond the ambit of this paper, my aim is to open our thinking and practice about these objects to an encounter with the Thing, the auratic object which is very different and potentially more disturbing than variable, optical objects. It persists in entangling us in difficult and demanding questions surrounding the (im)possible relations of participatory culture in new media environments such as how is the very space constituted where entities like the P10 steamer can emerge, exerting their power of fascination?

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