

Abstract

The thesis is designed to improve our understanding of user participation in Web-based development practices in the commercial setting of the 3D software industry. It aims to investigate whether the creative capacities of users and their contributions to the online firm-hosted 3D platform are indicative of a novel configuration of production that influences the processes of product development across firm boundaries.

The thesis mobilizes the user participation literature developing in media research as its main theoretical framework. It builds on insights derived from work on user participation in media sites as seen through a cultural lens, in particular, as developed in Henry Jenkins' notions of 'participatory' and 'convergence culture'. The user participation literature is supported by a combination of insights drawn from work on communities of practice and user-centred innovation so as to offer a more robust approach to examine and appreciate the firm-hosted 3D platform as a site of user participation. More specifically, the conceptual framework for the study provides a basis for an examination of the ways a software developer firm encourages user participation in a market and of how this enables and facilitates particular modes of user creativity. These are shown to shape and maintain a firm-hosted platform that aids product development efforts that are expected to benefit the developer firm. An empirical study of the platform, Second Life, provides the basis for the analysis of firm-user interactions which are shown to underpin a distinctive firm learning process in the context of product development that occurs across permeable firm boundaries.

The thesis yields insight into the way a developer firm invites its user base to partner with it in product development, indicating how aspects of user participation associated with non-market dynamics are embedded in commercial activity and professionalism. The pivotal role of users is revealed in the design, development and sustainability of a firm-hosted 3D product. The findings point to interesting relationships between the distinctive creative capacities of users and the range of capabilities afforded by the firm-provided design space. Variations in user participation and contributions to product development suggest that particular patterns of learning opportunities occur. The analysis yields several new concepts including a 'modification effect market' which are used to extend existing conceptualizations of user participation in digital development practices in the commercial setting of the 3D software industry.