Case 3.1

Sackboy Planet

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Imagine you are a creative genius at the helm of a control room, the puppet master to an adorable humanoid knit character capable of executing your vision for an entire video game—from the look of the setting, to the playable characters, to the dialogue, to the story that unfolds for anyone who plays the game you created.¹ This is the capstone experience of LittleBigPlanet 2 (LBP2),² a puzzle-based and maker-oriented video game that was released by Media Molecule in January 2011 for the PlayStation 3 (see figure C.3.1a).

The game quickly gained popularity upon its release and garnered a major following in the United States and the United Kingdom. The main story follows a character named Sackboy as he tries to save his home world, Craftworld, from an evil interdimensional vacuum cleaner called the Negativitron. Gameplay operates similarly to side-scrolling action games; you control Sackboy and jump through obstacles and figure out puzzles until completing the level. Key features of the game include opportunities for players to craft levels and planets within the galaxy of Craftworld. Central to the design of the game are a number of digital tools that give players the means to create their own levels, animations, character art, and soundtracks (see figure C.3.1b for a screen shot of the level editor). Through use of these tools, players gain technical expertise, get practice in creativity and problem solving, and have numerous opportunities to collaborate and share their creations. This focus on production—the game’s tagline is “Play, Create, Share”—is enabled through the game’s careful scaffolding: The game fluidly guides players from the play of a traditional side-scrolling game to use of the level editor, teaching players how to use the tools as part of actual gameplay.

Players learn how to use the game controller to select and modify objects, place stickers, use power-ups, and, most important, navigate the physics-based world. This scaffolded approach couples entertainment
with production, minimizing barriers to the construction of unique levels that can be shared and played by others. One designer described the game as “a creative tool, which just allows you to make whatever you like, really. It’s a whole toolkit of materials, of bits of electronics.” This framing of the game as a platform for player creativity permeates
the game’s marketing materials and is expressed across all levels of the
game’s design, from the embedded design tools, to community features
that enable sharing and feedback, to the structure of actual gameplay.

*LittleBigPlanet 2* and its associated player-created design communities
establish a shared purpose around creative production, feedback, and
the development of technical expertise through their various com-

munity initiatives. One of these online communities, *Sackboy Planet*,
has more than 1,000 active members (23,000 have registered since its
launch several years ago). The audience is best described as predomin-
antly “geeky” and male, though outliers exist beyond these categories
in the broader community. As part of their shared purpose to support
and educate others in design, *Sackboy Planet* members collectively
produce and curate in-depth tutorials and informational YouTube
videos for new learners. The community establishes a shared purpose
through its designated sections of the forums, where users reciprocally
provide assistance to others as they work through issues with their de-

signs. Community members also organize huge contests around the
production of creative game levels with particular themes and require-
ments. Players of a variety of skill levels submit their works in progress
through stages of the contest process, receive feedback, improve their
designs, and then share final products for review by expert designers in
the community. Winners are celebrated for their hard work and generate
a feeling of excitement; this process aids in the production of ideals
for the rest of the community to aim for in their work.

Leaders of *Sackboy Planet* designed forums in ways that allow par-
ticipants to easily share and receive feedback on their game design cre-

ations. The site includes a number of formal reputation-metric features
in the form of post upvotes, reputation bars that reflect activity, badges
for achievements, and displays of hearts or likes for particular level cre-

ations. Within the game itself, players can view various “top” charts for
games across different categories, including by number of hearts/likes,
trending levels, and hand-selected “picks” from the company that de-
signed the *LittleBigPlanet* franchise, Media Molecule. The forums also
cultivate informal means to evaluate the quality of others’ works, in-
cluding feedback-for-feedback threads where participants provide ad-
vice about the others’ works in progress. Both quantified metrics and
informal reputation mechanisms, such as peer-to-peer reviews and
sharing, work hand in hand to elevate the high achievers in the level
design community through time.

Learner Story

Gadget42, a 15-year-old white male from the United States and a Sackboy Planet participant, is a 10th grader with passions for theater, English literature, and gaming. He loves school and spends most of his time with other thespians practicing for upcoming theater productions. Although he describes himself as an average student, he is definitely “more of an English/history person.” He does well in science, “but English and talking and stuff is more my personality.”

When not at school, Gadget42 enjoys playing LBP2 and hanging out on Sackboy Planet. A friend introduced him to the game a couple of years ago, and he was hooked immediately and began experimenting with the level editor. “I liked it right away. I would build little cars . . . it was fairly simple at first but when I started to try more advanced things it got more difficult.” Once he began tackling harder design challenges, he searched the internet for help and stumbled upon Sackboy Planet, where he found tutorials and a kind community. “The people were friendly . . . we all have something in common, which is LittleBigPlanet.” He posted questions about design to solicit guidance from more experienced members, and as he honed his skills, he began to regularly offer help to those who had questions just like he had had. For Gadget42, the Sackboy Planet community invigorated the potential of the game and magnified his interest in learning how to design levels among supportive peers.

Like other Sackboy Planet members I spoke with, Gadget42 finds connections between his own academically oriented interests and the types of design challenges he tackles in the game. In particular, his experience with English literature lends itself to level creation. As an English student, he writes lots of stories that help him brainstorm better level designs. “I learn to develop a story arc, which then I use for LittleBigPlanet to create the beginning, the middle, and the end of the story level I’m making. Currently I am writing and making a murder mystery point-and-click adventure game.” For Gadget42, the skills he developed in school as a student of English literature have productive overlap with
level design. To create a successful level, he mixes computer programming with story development to make a murder mystery game.

*Sackboy Planet* was also a place where Gadget42 made new friends who became fellow gamers and collaborators on design creations. After hanging out with other players in the forums and in the chat room, he began building closer friendships with people who challenged his design thinking. “It’s nice seeing other people’s views about the game.” As far as his day-to-day activity in the forums, he spends most of his time hanging out with his friends online by talking about shared interests and helping them with design puzzles. “Most of the time I’m helping out friends. Trying to figure out the [design] logic for *LBP2* and story and gameplay and stuff like that.” Often, he and his friends will play *LBP2* levels together or co-create new levels: “On *LBP2* we can have four people online in Create mode. We all create the story as we go. Sometimes we write it out before. One of us creates the gameplay and the other does the aesthetics of the level. We all decide if one part isn’t good enough to be in it or if it needs a little work.”

Gadget42 exemplifies connected learning at work through interest-driven, peer-supported, and academically relevant activities in *LBP2* and on *Sackboy Planet*. His interest in the game and his passion for English literature overlap in ways that make learning complex computer-programming and game-design skills much more fun. When he or his peers need help, they reach out through email, text, or video chat and assist each other. Sometimes they even design together by generating their own management style agreed upon by the group. They develop roles (i.e., writing, aesthetics, gameplay) and frequently run ideas and creations by each other to ensure high-quality designs. Gadget42 finds support online for his interest in the video game, and the level design skills he develops connect to a number of academic subjects.