

Patreon and Porn Games: Crowdfunding Games, Reward Categories and Backstage Passes

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ABSTRACT

Patreon is a *crowdfunding* platform where pornographic games are funded; even the most successful game developer in terms of the number of members is developing a pornographic game. We looked at 42 developers and their Patreon pages in order to examine the effects of the Patreon crowdfunding model on videogame development. Especially we studied membership rewards. As a result, developers were not only selling the game, but rewards we much about *Community*, *Influence*, and *Recognition*. Regulating *Content Access* is used regularly but often the latest version of the game is made available to everybody, just later to the members funding the development. We propose that certain rewards are similar to backstage passes in the music business and suggest that Patron pornographic games funding deviates from the crowdfunding model is not following mainly product-oriented commodity logic but a more community-oriented concept.

Keywords

Patreon, pornography, porgraphic games, crowdfunding, rewards

INTRODUCTION

Crowdfunding is a recent fundraising tool (see, Macht and Weatherston 2014). Several crowdfunding platforms have surfaced in recent years. Notably, some low entry selling platforms, such as itch.io exists along with more established digital distribution platforms such as Steam. According to Smith (2015), crowdfunding has become an important venue for funding game development projects. *Kickstarter* and *Indiegogo* are some of the prominent crowdfunding platforms for games. Developers usually set a minimum funding goal needed for the project realisation, and a deadline. If not funded by deadline, backers receive their investments back.

An alternative funding model has recently arrived where project members on the *Patreon* service fund projects by monthly payments or when work is published. Patreon hosts many game development projects. Surprisingly, Patreon also hosts many pornographic game projects. Moreover, these pornographic games have more funding members than regular game projects, at least among the top 50 listed developers (cf. Figure 1). *Summertime Saga* (DarkCookie n.d.) and *Monster Girl Island* (Redamz n.d.) are top-funded projects in terms of funding member numbers: *Summertime Saga* is third and *Monster Girl Island* is 22nd in the Patreon top list (Graphtreon 2019). Even

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YouTube channels covering adult games on Patreon attract subscribers: *Patreon Gaming* (n.d.) channel has 27.7 thousand subscribers. *Adult Games* YouTube channel covering all kinds of adult games (including Patreon funded games) has 42.5 thousand subscribers.

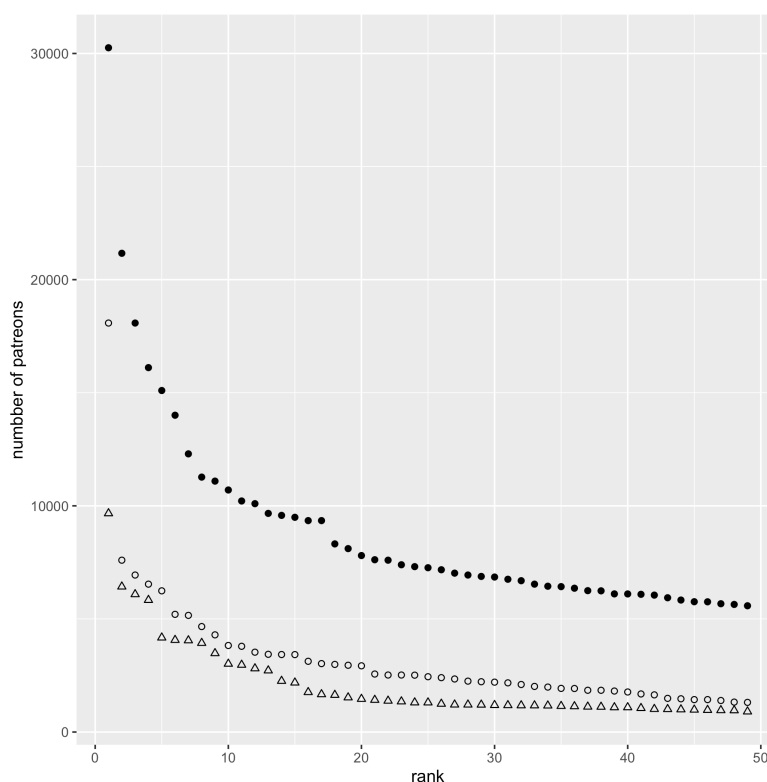


Figure 1. Filled dots: all Patreon projects, dots: adult games, triangles: games. Figure is based on data from Graphtreon (2019) on September 4, 2019.

Pornographic games, both hard- or softcore, have traditionally mostly existed outside of the traditional Western game publishing ecosystem (cf. Krzywinska 2012). Erotic game mods also exist as mostly free amateur production. In general, these mods remove clothes or change them for more revealing ones, but they can add sex toys and dialogue. Games seem to follow similar trajectories to other types of pornographic content distribution; the Internet offers plenty of non-traditional ways to publish or sell pornography. For example, webcam models perform private streaming shows for paying clients, but only start when a given price level has been collectively tipped (Jones (2016). Notably, unpaid amateur pornography predominantly exist on the Internet (Ruberg 2016).

A systematic review conducted by Harviainen, Brown and Suominen (2018) on sex-related studies within the game studies field indicates that adult games production is underresearched. In the context of Internet and videogame pornography, the rise of Patreon-funded productions constitutes a new and curious phenomenon that we explore in this paper.

Pornography in Videogames

Krzywinska (2012) notes there is “proportionally little sex in games in relation to other media”. This still applies to AAA titles. In Japan, dating sims and RPGs with pornographic content are more prevalent than within Western game publishing (Taylor 2007).

Nevertheless, sex has a long history in computer games. Players brought sex to multiplayer games such as MUDs, MOOs (text-based online virtual worlds), *Second Life* (cited in Bratwaite 2006), and *World of Warcraft* (ibid). Even single-player videogames with sexual content were already being published for early game systems. *Soft Porn Adventure* (ibid) was published in 1981 and *Artworx Strip Poker* in 1982 for Apple computers. *Custer's Revenge* – from 1983 depicted a rape of a Native American woman – gained negative press but sold twice as much as *Bachelor Party*, another pornographic game from 1982 (ibid). These first games used low-resolution pixel graphics. More realistic game graphics arrived during the 90s, e.g. *Voyeur* (ibid) in 1996 used full motion video technique. The Internet provided an unregulated channel for pornographic games. Examples of those are *Love Chess* (ibid) and *Dream Stripper* (ibid). *Grand Theft Auto: San Andreas* (ibid) in 2004 contained pornographic content that was not available by default but could secretly be activated. This caused a big controversy. (For a more detailed review of the history, refer to Brathwaite 2006; D. Brown 2008.) Indeed all current game console manufacturers, such as Sony, Nintendo and Microsoft, have veto rights over console content published and subsequently exclude pornographic games.

According to Taylor (2007), dating sim games that can contain explicit pornographic content, are quite popular in Japan, and are known as the *eroge* subgenre. Dating sims games are rarely exported to Western markets (JAST USA being an exception of a publisher who does English language versions of Japanese videogames).

Brathwaite (2006) highlights the so-called *retail wall* – when retailers ban pornographic games and refuse to distribute them. Subsequently, sales models intended to circumvent the retail wall arise:

- *Download purchase model* – games are sold via proprietary websites.
- *Subscription model* – games are playable in exchange for subscription fees.
- *Advertisement model* – games are freely downloadable and earn money through advertisements.
- *Upgrade programs* – game upgrades are sold that change game content to adult variety. (ibid, p.213; cf. production logics in Kerr 2017, pp.68–74)

Brathwaite's research is before the advent of crowdfunding and Patreon and consequently do not acknowledge these new phenomena.

Crowdfunding Game Development

Before focusing on Patreon pornographic games, we review general crowdfunding research in order to contextualize Patreon projects focusing on development financing, through indie scenes to motivations (for crowdfunding participation), technology and value co-production perspectives.

Financing issues of the video game industry have been explored by business studies (Teipen 2016), political economy and communications studies (Dyer-Witthford and Sharman 2005), focusing on macro-level resource-based outlooks on this aspect. From a game developer perspective, Giddings (2018) analysis of “ludic economies” discourses might be more rewarding; the game medium thus reflects the economic systems that created it, subsequently implying that new financing modes give rise to new gaming modes. Giddings (2018) proposes alternative ludic economies that deviate from the prevailing “neoliberal cultural economy of late capitalist consumer society”. Questions arise how game development is affected by new financing models such as crowdfunding or Patreon.

Crowdfunding is definitely embraced by the indie game community or *scene* as Gosling and Crawford (2011) frame it, borrowing from British cultural studies of music-affiliated cultures (Hesmondhalgh 2005). Through crowdfunding these games scene short-circuit the traditional game industry financing and marketing model by transposing financier and consumer into a crowdfunding *prosumer-investor* (Planells 2017). However, these indie scenes are difficult to define: Simon (2013), Lipkin (2013) and Crogan (2018) point to a mainstream oppositionality towards the commercialised mainstream cultural production. In the indie scene self-financing is the dominant solution (Tyni 2017; Guevara-Villalobos 2013), and studies of crowdfunded indie games (Guillaud et al. 2013) indicate that its existence constitutes a failure by the traditional financing models. What are the consequences for game development and industry? Nucciarelli et al. (2017) explore effects on game industry value chains; Tyni (2017) analyses affiliations to dominant game industry cultural production logics based on Kerr's (2017) framework; Gerber and Hui (2013) examines motivations of crowdfunding creators and backers and Brown, Boon and Pitt (2017) investigate marketing dimensions. Finally, Planells (2017) analyses the discourses of crowdfunded game projects.

The research question of this exploratory study is to examine the effects of the Patreon crowdfunding model on videogame development, and particularly to analyse how the structural elements (such as rewards) affect the dynamics between developer and members/backers/funders.

RESULTS

Below we examine different Patreon project membership levels and their reward levels. Each level is associated with different costs and rewards. We assume that rewards reveal details about how developer–funder relations operate.

Patreon Funded Games and Developers

We looked at 42 developers creating pornographic games on the Patreon service. The sample was a convenience sample based on YouTube game review recommendations and discussion forum links. Random sampling was not a viable option as Patreon does not provide an index of adult games projects. The main inclusion criteria was that the developer offered a freely playable version of (one of) their game(s), in order to verify the game as a pornographic one. We were not members of any examined project and information was collected through publicly available project pages. In our data collection, we focused on Patreon project member rewards.

In our sample, games vary from the linear *visual novel*-type games to more point-and-click adventure titles. These games are similar to Japanese dating sim games. Some games are very linear visual novels and others use branching approaches. All games have a strong storytelling element. Most of the games were developed using *Ren'Py* platform. In addition to *Ren'py*, *RPG Maker*, *Unity*, *NW Game Engine*, and proprietary solutions are employed. A majority of games in the sample use pre-rendered 3D graphics, but some use 2D drawn images. The *RPG Maker* games use 2.5D view accompanied by elements using pre-rendered 3D graphic inserts. 3D models in many cases are bought on asset store sites such as daz3d.com.

While providing a full content analysis is out of the scope of this paper, a description of the sampled games is in order. The player character is mostly a young, adult, white man (the PC is occasionally a young, adult, white woman and in one case a middle-aged white man). All games contain explicit sex scenes with multiple partners with various combinations (man–woman, man and two or more women, and two women),

but no sex between two men.¹ Many games contain non-consensual sex, peeping, and various fetishes (e.g., big breast, lactating, sex in cow suit). Incest is also present in multiple games, although hidden and alluded with code words such as “landlady” and “room mate”. Most of the games are set in contemporary surroundings. Some have fantasy elements, such as mind control and few games take place in fantasy or science fiction worlds. Funders sometimes get to influence game content. As an example, Jikei (n.d.), *Mythic Manor* developer, polled between ten different options (such as funari/trap, watersports, bondage, tentacles, among others), and as a result, threesome/group sex and pregnancy/impregnation sex scenes were included in the game. The Patreon funded games are heteronormative, but sex between women is accepted in a similar fashion to popular adult films, as analyzed by Tibbals (2010).

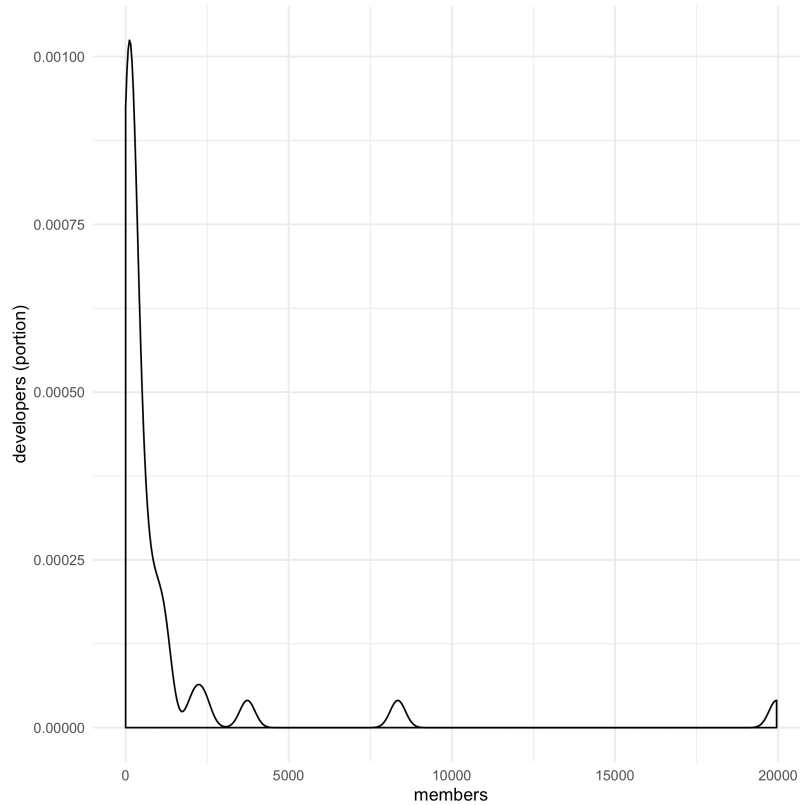


Figure 2. The number of members funding the developers.

Most of the developers in the sample are developing their first game. Four developers had one finished game and are developing a second one. The project owner can choose to use monthly payment or payments per release. All projects in this sample used a monthly fee model, the monthly revenue varied from 0 USD to 55 186 USD and the number of members from 0 to 19 955. *Summertime Saga* (DarkCookie n.d.) is the most funded Patreon adult game with 19 955 members and 55 186 USD in monthly revenue. Patreon takes a 5%, 8% or 12% fee from monthly revenues depending on the plan, and there are also payment processing fees (of 2.9%+30¢ or 5%+10¢ if payment is less than 3\$). Note that not all developers reveal their monthly revenues, just the number of members. Membership levels are segmented by monthly fees. For example, the first membership level typically costs 1 USD/month and the second usually 5 USD/month. The majority of projects had over 100 funding members. The table below summarises the number of project members.

For developers Patreon provides a distribution, sales and communication platform. Patreon does not provide project indexes, subsequently requiring alternative discovery

channels, such as YouTube game reviewers and social media (e.g., Twitter). *Summertime Saga* developer regularly streams on picarto.tv about the development process, while the *Patreon Gaming* YouTube channel posts gameplay videos (with explicit sexual content cut-out or blurred). Figure 2 shows the distribution of number of members funding developers in our sample; most of the developers (n=28) in our sample has less than 500 members.

Patreon Reward Categorisation

Content Access

The content access category contains the subcategories of *Game Access* and *Extra Content*. Patreon projects release regular development updates. Many projects are gapping the access to these updates: higher-paying “membership level” members get earlier access (compared to lower level-members or non-members) to the latest versions of the game. Access time window depends on membership levels (faster is more expensive). In some cases, only the earlier part of the game is downloadable as in *No More Secrets—Remake* (RoyalCandy n.d.) where Episodes 1 and 2 are available for everyone and only higher-level members get access to episodes 1–8 or even 1–9. However, many developers make their games freely available, but where paying members receive the latest version earlier. For example, 10 USD level members get the *ANNA Exciting Affection* (DeepSleep Games n.d.) at the release, but 5 USD level members get access two weeks later and non-members even later. *Summertime Saga* (DarkCookie n.d.) uses the same access gap model, for example, as *ANNA Exciting Affection* (DeepSleep Games n.d.). Some developers implied that higher-level members are beta testers or alpha testers: Sad Crab Company (n.d.) describes its rewards as follows: 5 USD level receives “Beta-version the month before release” and 20 USD membership level “Alpha-test a month before Beta-version” (as one of the level rewards).

Content Access can come in the form of privileged download channels which entail faster downloads. Some projects even provide *Extra Content* available to some higher-level members, ranging from calendars and posters to walkthroughs and cheats. Other games even deliver additional elements added to the game for higher level members.

Andrealphus (n.d.), developer of *Love and Sex: Second Base*, offers scene list descriptions and provides conditions that trigger these scenes. The developer also offers source code access to higher level members. Astaros3D Games (n.d.) has (what is called) “plus version” of *My Cute Roommate* with “more animations and content”. However, more typically, projects offer calendars, pin-up or hard-core renders of models and scenes from the games, as well as videos.

From one perspective content access reward category relates to what Brathwaite (2006) describes as circumventing the retail wall, that is providing new modes of sales and distribution of sex games that are blocked by the commercial mainstream industry structures. Gerber and Hui (2013) identify that the top supporter motivation for crowdfunding participation is constituted by rewards, which is associated with a classic commodity exchange logic, where backers aim for economic value from project outcome in exchange for their backing/investments. This perspective is also supported by Planells’ (2017) notion of the gamer transforming from a “gamer-buyer” to a “prosumer-investor” with the advent of crowdfunding – evolving from a passive purchasing decision into an active prosumer investment decision, albeit still very much within a commodity logic. Subsequently, it can be assumed pornographic game content (besides actual game play, also includes other types of content such as video clips, high resolution renders, posters, images, etc) is indeed the foundational commodity on which the Patreon ludic pornography economy is built. Generally, Patreon is used to sell

various content types (e.g. podcasts, YouTube content, online publications etc.), but as noted above, the game is often freely available with a time cap making the reward not merely about purchasing a game. We argue that backing a pornographic game project provides multidimensional value where pornographic content commodity is an indispensable foundation, but do not constitute the only or even the main motivating force. Rather, we would point to the value generation built on top of this commodity in terms of community, status, influence and recognition.

Community

The quintessential reward category is community access. This reward is about providing funders access to posts on the Patreon service (they can be made public or visible only to a certain membership level, or above), access to specific Discord servers and channels, and in some cases development video stream archives. DarkCookie (n.d.) describes 5 USD level member benefits as “He can now eat more cookies and give you access to Patreon-only feed! Share your thoughts and read the latest development feed and vote for the upcoming content each update!” The Discord channel of DarkCookie seems community oriented according to its level description: “He can now eat boxes of cookies [...] and let you hang out in a private discord channel with spoilers!” Discord thus provides access to an inner community circle.

Gerber and Hui (2013) conclude that supporters are mainly driven by rewards, helping others, community participation and supporting the cause of the project. Admittedly, they are primarily related to the development phase of a crowdfunded project – only “rewards” is product/service-oriented. Gerber and Hui’s study do clearly indicate that backer motivation is multifaceted and not exclusively linked to utility maximisation of an economic transaction. We observe that the community reward category is mainly about selling community membership. Brown (2012), when writing about indie musicians and their fan relations, talks about *symbiotic relationships* and how fan clubs are part of nurturing that relationship. Community rewards are about nurturing the relationship between member communities and developers. Naturally, those communities are reliant on relevant activities to keep members engaged.

The notion of a community in game studies is multifaceted and multidimensional. Gosling and Crawford (2011) stresses the importance of *game scenes* in the context of game communities, thus expanding an audience theoretical tradition from cultural, media and communication studies. This assumption in itself is opposed by some game scholars since, it is claimed, gamers are conceptualised as active participants of the game medium and not its “media audience”. Gamers, metaphorically speaking, are not observing from the spectator stands, but are playing in the sports fields. However, Gosling and Crawford do make a case for gamer audiences by defining them in terms of “elective belongings” i.e. in terms similar to *community* – the reasons for community participation are manifold, but suffice to say, gamer communities constitute vivid foundations of various game (sub)cultures (Dymek 2012). A meso-level analysis between the macro-level of (sub)culture and the micro-level of community – is constituted by the *scene* level. The notion stems from British cultural studies of music-affiliated cultures, such as *goth scenes*. In Gosling and Crawford’s (2011) conceptualisation, the scene notion allows for an understanding of how elective belongings are experienced, and secondly, how scenes achieve extraordinary meanings at certain times and locations (such as during festivals). Hesmondhalgh (2005) posits two categories of scenes: *place bound*, i.e. geographically based and “*complex spatial flows of music affiliations*” (our italics), i.e. scenes not limited by geographical boundaries.

This is a rewarding way of conceptualising Patreon members: Its members are not bound by geographical positions, consequently belonging to, following Hesmondhalgh

(2005), the *spatial flows of affiliations*. Those flows directly coalesce through the elective belonging of funding a Patreon project. The *extraordinary meaning* is achieved through the elusive final release version of the game – a goal that once achieved usually dissolves the community commitment, which instead moves on to the next title, predominantly with the same developer. The main goal seems to be constituted by the development journey through the beta versions towards a release candidate and, most importantly, to be part of the community of backers that receive a Patreon-only feed, dialogue with developers through Discord-channels and becoming part of the developer’s inner circle. Within marketing studies target markets consist of consumer groups with similar characteristics (predominantly in terms of consumer demand) that embody the most profitable market segments (Kotler 2008). What better way to define and obtain this target market than by engaging in a game scene, and asking the community of elective belongings to supply financing, subsequently short-circuiting the entire financing and marketing model by transposing financier and consumer into a crowdfunding prosumer-investor (Planells 2017)?

Influence

The most typical *Influence* reward is voting rights regarding game features. The developer of *Summertime Saga* (DarkCookie n.d.) regularly poll which game questline should be developed next. Some developers even allow certain membership levels to design a scene in their game. For example, MikeMasters (n.d.) developer of *College Life*, has the following reward to the 30 USD level members.: “Desing [sic] your own scene however you like, but I reserve the right to refuse your proposal (for ethical, moral and tasteful reasons)”.

Smith (2015) explores the developer-backer relationship during two separate phases: campaign (fundraising) and post-campaign (game development). Smith explores several cases of backer influence during and after campaign phases, and although he refers to these relations as “co-creational” it is evident that limited symmetry exists in terms of communication or power. For instance, the Kickstarter game project *Star Citizen* has during development experienced multi-year delays, spin-off titles, financial mismanagement and chaotic production timeline (Valentine 2019) – aspects which backers have very limited influence over and, at occasions, even insight into. Although value co-creation according to the prominent service-dominant logic (Vargo and Lusch 2004) is always generated among multiple stakeholders because of its contextual and phenomenological determination; it can hardly, within the context of crowdfunded game projects, be considered truly co-creational in terms of game *development*.

Perhaps in the significantly greater scope of the crowdsourcing as such, where the prosumer-investor value is recursively producing and consuming value dynamically in cooperation with the game developer, the service-dominant value co-creation perspective is rewarding. Nevertheless, this is beyond the scope of this study, since in our cases backers and developers are distinctly separated, and communication/power relations are considerably asymmetrical. This is clearly reflected in the case of Patreon pornographic games where game developers are predominantly anonymous, as well as backers, hence diminishing aspects of accountability; there is limited interest, or possibility, in making someone answerable when everyone involved is maintaining certain levels of anonymity.

Recognition

Name in the credits is used in some projects as a higher level-reward: “Your name in the credits! (only if you want)” (Mr.ZZ n.d.) or “Your name credited in a special ‘Thank You’ Section in the About page within the game.” (Sumodeine n.d.). The name in credits is a case of a *public recognition*. Such rewards have been used in crowdfunding projects outside of Patreon. Thürridl and Kamleitner (2015) study indicates that public

recognition, such as a name on a project website, increases willingness to pay and sense of project ownership. The sense of ownership connects the *recognition* reward category to the *community* reward category.

Some projects have special channels or roles on Discord for some higher level members. Novel (n.d.) provides the “Unique discord role” reward at 5 USD level and above. Discord role is not a public recognition, as such, but a recognition inside the members' community. This is further elaborated by Gerber and Hui’s (2013) framework of supporter motivation where helping others and supporting a cause are important factors, making public recognition a type of affirmation of this commitment. As elaborated earlier, within game scene literature (Gosling and Crawford 2011), it is proposed that game scenes are understood by two dimensions: community-supporting *elective belongings* in everyday life and pivotal events of *extraordinary meaning*. These extraordinary meaning-generating events are constituted by the “final version of the game”: providing name credits to this event becomes a process of assigning recognition to the most valuable contributors within the gaming scene of elective belongings.

No Reward

Surprisingly, some funding levels are not associated with any rewards. In some cases (e.g., Dark Cookie, n.d.) this is part of the 1 USD level member category, but more often within highest membership levels with 50 USD or 100 USD. MrDots games have 25, 30, 50, and 100 USD level members without new rewards: “Extra tier for those who want to donate more to the development of my games.” PhillyGames (n.d.) has 100 USD level members with the description: “Some crazy patrons demanded it.” *No Reward* in these higher membership levels is without rewards like the lower membership level no reward, as the higher membership level comes mostly with the rewards of all lower levels.

Gerber and Hui’s (2013) mentions the backer motivation of *supporting a cause* – which can partially explain this phenomenon. In cases where *no reward* are the highest membership levels, this is evident, as this is “for those who want to donate more to the development” i.e. contribute to the project in its clearest form: more.

Reward Categories Usage

The median number of membership levels offered by the projects is five (min 1 and max 9) and the median of the unique rewards offered is 4 (min 1 and max 6). In many cases, developers are using *Content Access*, *Influence*, and *Community* type rewards together. *Community* and *Content Access* reward types come early whereas *Influence* rewards are typically higher membership level rewards. Notably, some *Content Access* rewards, such as gapped game access with a long gap are the early ones, where variations such as source code access and extra content comes in with higher membership level. The table below lists how prevalence the reward categories were used by the developers. *Content Access* and *Community* are the most used rewards. Many developers also use *Recognition* and *Influence* rewards and *No Reward* reward was the least used in our sample.

Reward category	Used as reward in % projects (Binomial CI _{95%})
Content access	95.2% (83.8%–99.4%)
Community	81.0% (65.9%–91.4%)
Recognition	52.4% (36.4%–68.0%)

Influence	61.9% (45.6%–76.4%)
No reward	28.6% (15.7%–44.6%)

Table 1. Prevalence of the reward types

We also conducted two exploratory analyses looking at the relation between the number of members and rewards. The analyses were conducted using ordinal regression and cumulative link models using the ordinal package (Christensen 2015) on R (R Core Team 2019). Generalized linear regression models were also tried, but diagnostics indicated that the models were judged to not be adequate for the data by inspecting diagnostic plots. For the ordinal models, the number of members was used as an ordinal variable.

Community reward explicated predicts the number of members ($\beta=2.61$, $p=0.003$) but *Content Access*, *Status*, *Influence*, or *No Reward* does not significantly predict the number of members. All predictors were included in the same model. The few projects that did not have any spelled-out community rewards did have few members. The number of unique rewards levels predicts the number of members ($\beta=1.01$, $p<0.001$). We can speculate that this relation indicate that different rewards offers something to backers with different motivations.

DISCUSSION

The results of this study will be discussed in relation to the following pertinent themes:

- Patreon-funding as new mode of indie game financing
- effects of Patreon-funding on game production
- Patreon-funding as a marketing and communications strategy

Gerber and Hui (2013), probably the earliest and currently most cited research on crowdfunding and motivations, identify the following aspects why developers participate in crowdfunding projects:

- raise funds
- expand awareness of work
- form connections
- gain approval
- maintain control
- learn new fundraising skills.

In terms of creator motivations fundraising, learning new fundraising skills and maintaining control (of management/ownership by avoiding equity investors with voting rights) are all linked to the financing function of crowdfunding. The remaining motivations – expand awareness, form connections and gain approval – are all dimensions of marketing communications. Both of these dimensions and their effect on videogame development will be discussed.

Patreon-funding as a New Mode of Indie game Financing

In terms of research on the financing issues of the videogame industry these mainly stem from business studies (Teipen 2016), political economy and communications studies (Dyer-Witthford and Sharman 2005), focusing on macro-level factors such as institutions, regional policies and industrial dynamics. Financing is here conceptualised as the management of capital allocations, which in a more traditional sense, is a correct framing of this notion. Financing thus is a means to an end – on macro-level one of several resources, along with IP, HR, brand community, know-how and others, in the

hands of developers and publishers. However, from a micro-level developer perspective, financing is the great enabler that makes all game worlds possible. Big financing provides sprawling online 3D worlds with millions of real-time players carried by a global server farm network distributed in every physical and digital games outlet, whereas small financing produces an indie retro pixel 2D game sold on niche digital distribution platforms (such as itch.io). Giddings (2018) explores the origins of the various models of “ludic economies” that permeate early games scholarship and still reverberate in contemporary discourses. Giddings clearly focuses on the prevailing “neoliberal cultural economy” of “late capitalist consumer society” that is manifested in everything from *Super Mario’s* (ibid) coins, through the economic resource management perspective of *The Sims* (ibid), to the all-consuming *Pac-Man* (ibid), thus representing games as the ultimate market commodity. This discourse is by no means only restricted to in-game diegetic symbolism – this is crucially also the business and production logic of the game industry from the arcade games of the 1980s and onwards. Games are commodities that are resold, repackaged, rereleased, upgraded, moded, expanded, streamed, ported, localised and individualised – for a (market) price. This discursive reality is of such dominant nature that it is hard to even imagine alternatives; Giddings, however, sheds light on alternative ludic economies e.g. based on Bataille’s (1988) “accursed share” that reimagines economy around notions of plenitude instead of the capitalist accumulation of scarcity. Giddings quotes Bernstein’s (1991, cited in Giddings 2018) reading of games as a potential medium of excess, waste, non-productivity and play that opposes, in some ways, the capitalist logic. Subsequently, imagining and assembling new ludic economies is intrinsically tied to financing. Pornographic games are arguably, in terms of content, as far away as is possible from of the mainstream game console-based ludic commodity economy – the financing modes of dominant game industry business models are inadequate of managing the risks associated with controversial content.

Pornographic games are in some ways the quintessential non-mainstream, independent and divergent indie game genre due to its controversial and divisive content. The notion of indie is, however, challenging to define: Simon (2013) refers to production modes, game design and graphics styles, IP related legal and economic concepts, and as an ethos, or cultural scene of production and consumption. Lipkin (2013) discusses indie as mainstream oppositionality, with ideological discourses as the independent, alternative, individual, liberated, expressive, artistic other in contrast and opposition to the commercialised mainstream cultural production. Crogan (2018), based on Stiegler’s (2011) philosophy of “hyperindustrial society”, characterises the commercial mainstream cultural production as a process of neoliberalisation of the global economy. In other words, indie game development can be seen as a way of opposing game industry discourses. Applied in the context of this study, it could be argued that the risk aversion of the contemporary financing modes of the commercialised mainstream game industry are structurally excluding independent game genres such as pornographic games – it is easier for the mainstream game industry to embrace space wars with alien civilisations in the future, than it is to embrace the sexuality and pornography of contemporary society.

Admittedly, in terms of financing, indie games by its industry oppositionality, also disassociate themselves from the established, traditional modes of financing. Subsequently, financing indie game development is considerably challenging and resorts to self-financing as the dominant solution (Tyni 2017; Guevara-Villalobos 2013). Guillaud, Hänninen, Mariot and Perret (2013) studied over 1000 game titles crowdfunded on Kickstarter, and compared those to all the PC games published through established industry structures, concluding that there is a failure to provide for existing demand in the traditional videogames industry which permits the emergence of the crowdfunded games. This fact in itself, in terms of financing structures, vindicates the

raison d'être for the indie game sector, and also demonstrates the need for new financing models for game development.

Effects of Patreon-funding on Videogame Development

With the arrival of a new funding model its consequences in terms of value networks, production networks and business models, need to be analysed.

Nucciarelli et al (2017) approach crowdfunding in the game industry from a value chain theory perspective by exploring value chains/networks and diffused value chain/networks within crowdfunding of digital games. They conclude that interactions among developers, their traditional stakeholders (e.g. publishers and distributors) and customers (i.e. user communities) are greatly redesigned with the arrival of crowdfunding. Moreover, focus is shifting from value chain/networks to technology platforms since they bring together different stakeholders and allow them to interact enabling collaboration among developers and a multi-purpose user community for the funding and co-development of new products. This is highly relevant for the case of Patreon whose technology platform reshapes crowdfunding with a subscription-based financing model. Or, in terms of Giddings (2018), the ludic economies and the game worlds they give rise to, are built on and preconditioned by these technology platforms. The Patreon game financing model might superficially merely modify the existing crowdfunding model, but a prerequisite is its technology platform innovation that “servicifies” crowdfunding, through a monthly subscription model.

Tyni (2017) posits crowdfunding as an emergent model that diverges from the five main logics of cultural production within the game industry (Kerr 2017): publishing logic (e.g. traditional AAA-productions), flow logic (e.g. MMOGs), club logic (e.g. monthly “all-you-can-play” subscriptions), performance logic (e.g. tournaments, or YouTube and Twitch streaming) and finally platform logic (e.g. free-to-play/freemium based on data, algorithms, and in-game purchasing). Tyni presents a game industry in constant transformation that has chronologically evolved in basically the same order as logic models presented above – from an industrial logic focused on physical production networks, through service-dominated digital distribution models (beginning with MMOGs and evolving into digital distribution platforms e.g. Steam and mobile app stores), and towards contemporary logics of performance, club and platform. However, it could be argued that Tyni’s transformation model appears to slightly overlooks the existence of the game console model since the dawn of the game industry, whose logic shares most features with the platform logic, albeit in a context of hardware and physical media and distribution. Tyni concludes that crowdsourcing represents a branching production logic organised around the crowdfunding phases of pre-, during and post-campaign – essentially structured in relation to the fundraising campaign. In terms of production logics the crowdfunding model is determined to be a combination of classic publishing logic mixed with aspects of platform logic, with strong emphasis on marketing functions, but also characteristics separate from the existing logics, mainly the role of customers/backers as central brokers.

Patreon-funding as a marketing and communications strategy

If we apply the insights from this game crowdfunding research on the particular case of Patreon pornographic games, it is rewarding to relate this earlier research on business functions. Brown, Boon and Pitt (2017) argue that crowdfunding can be classified as a marketing tool with three functions: research tool (e.g. quality of ideas, tracking backers, linking with social media analytics, competitor analysis), promotion/communication tool (backers and the entire crowdfunding community), and sales channel (placing orders through crowdfunding site).

Gerber and Hui's (2013), crowdfunding research on motivations, identifies "expand awareness of work", "form connections" and "gain approval" which are all listed after the top priority of "raising funds". These can all be considered as functions of marketing *communications* i.e. the communicative dimension of the marketing field. Marketing and marketing communications as notions are often erroneously conflated and frequently confused and interchangeably used with vague comprehensions as equivalents of "sales" i.e. the process of promotion and persuasion of potential buyers to commit to purchases. However, this is merely a small part of the marketing field, which is rather concerned with "an organizational function and a set of processes for creating, communicating, and delivering value to customers and for managing customer relationships in ways that benefit the organization and its stakeholders" (Darroch et al. 2004). Furthermore, Varey (Varey 2002, 156) defines marketing *communications* as "[t]he managerial system that ensures timely and comprehensive input to the corporate information and decision-making (generative) process, and the consequent production and expression of credible, persuasive representations of beneficial exchange opportunities with actual and prospective customers and other stakeholders". The game developer (company/organisation/entity) needs to communicate to "expand awareness of work", via the market place, with target groups, potential backers, associations, competitors, media outlets (that circulate and amplify the communicative range), opinion leaders, buyers, suppliers, future employees, relevant stakeholders in society, and many more – but also to collect and receive feedback from these aforementioned i.e. to enter in some kind of a/synchronous market-based dialogue. This dialogue provides the motivation for "gaining approval"; its is, in a certain way, a way of probing a market place in order to quantify, segment and target a consumer group, and then to position vis-à-vis competitors within this market – a fundamental step in the marketing process towards a marketing mix strategy (Kotler 2008), which is also confirmed by other research (T. E. Brown, Boon, and Pitt 2017) into crowdfunding as a research tool.

The motivation to "form connections" relates to network-oriented perspectives on marketing since it involves the establishment of networks of relations with customers, but also with suppliers, backers and other stakeholders. This motivation could be framed as a type of "relationship marketing" practice (Ravald and Grönroos 1996), or as an industry marketing network phenomenon (Balland, De Vaan, and Boschma 2013). Regardless of framing it is evident that in the case of game development, from a marketing theoretical perspective, Patreon constitutes a technological platform that enables, organises, aggregates and scales these "connection forms" in a complex, and as of yet unexplored, fashion – analysing reward categories (as in this study) is a definite step forward in this exploration process. There is a substantial need for more research in this field, but it is clear from this study's data that Patreon is used as a marketing tool, and in particular for marketing communications.

CONCLUSIONS: TOWARDS NEW CONCEPTUALISATIONS OF THE PATREON-FUNDING MODEL

The empirical data from this study indicate that Patreon-funded pornographic games represents a new mode of indie game financing, and that it substantially reorganises value chains and production logics of videogame development, similarly to the conclusions of crowdfunding in videogames literature. However, this study also suggests that Patron pornographic games funding deviates from the crowdfunding model, by going beyond the product-oriented commodity logic towards a more community-oriented concept. Based on a discourse analysis Planells (2017) claims that crowdfunding is discursively transforming the gamer from a traditional passive game-buyer limited to a few rigid game industry genres, into an emancipated prosumer-investor that embraces the innovative creativity of genuine *auteur* star developers. The gamer/backer is conceptualised (from a developer perspective) as a game connoisseur

that expertly invests in game projects, i.e. a product commodity investment logic built on consumer-side semi-professional expertise.

In the case of Patreon pornographic games this perspective only partially describes the phenomenon; product investment logic is not the dominant logic, but rather what this study tentatively refers to as a “backstage pass” logic. *Content Access* to game versions are not always the main product as this study’s empirical data shows that the reward categories of *Extra Content*, *Community*, *Influence*, *Recognition* and *No Reward* (donations) might constitute the main components of the total value proposition. An important Patreon aspect is to regularly publish game increments while engaging with the community by various means: access to discussion forums, through *Community* rewards and polls about game content (*Influence* rewards). As argued above, regulating *Content Access* is an important way to create revenues, though the content access is only one part of what Patreon developers provide. Several Patreon project games are freely available after a time cap or some version of the game is available, which strongly indicates that the actual game product is *not* the main focus (since the product is eventually provided for free), but that being part of the community, (public) recognition and potential to influence development seems to be the main appeal. Using a metaphor, if crowdfunding transformed the gamer from gamer-buyer into a prosumer-investor, then Patreon, in this study’s case of pornographic games, transforms the gamer once again into one that buys a *backstage pass*. Similarly, to backstage passes at music performances, these cards bestows the holder access to an exclusive area characterised by being much closer to the (star) performer/developer. This backstage pass becomes a credential for dedicated fandom giving admittance to, and dialogue with, the performer/developer – a way of gaining recognition and status and joining a selected community of like-minded enthusiasts. All of this value is based on the indispensable core product – the performance/game – but the main proposition of the backstage pass is built on top of, and around, this value foundation. Patreon’s “servicification” of crowdfunded investments, through a monthly subscription model without resignation periods, reduces entry barriers by lowering the consumer entry price and inexorably begets a process and service-oriented production and consumption logic. Currently, pornographic Patreon developers seem to be the innovative pioneers that spearhead this new form of game development, but future research will tell if this is afforded by the subcultural specifics of pornography, or whether this can evolve into new forms with mass-cultural appeal.

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ENDNOTES

- ¹ Notably that kind of homoerotic game content exists at least in free game mods (see Thompson 2018).