Participatory Film Production as Media Practice

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This article uses a practice theory perspective to study new media creation through the case of participatory film production. Although a growing body of practice-related literature addresses user-generated content or online creative communities, the engagement of collectives in the development of complex long-term creative projects like movies or transmedia has received less attention. Sometimes these are commercial projects generating communities for profit, sometimes actual cocreative or community-generated projects; either way, practice theory proves useful for observing and identifying expectations, motivations for engagement, intrinsic rules, tacit normativity, and routinization as well as innovation, compromise, and negotiation between the creative agents involved, particularly in a project's early stages. This article presents an overview of practice theories connected to media production and discusses them in relation to actual cases of participatory filmmaking.

Keywords: participation, practice theories, media production, participatory filmmaking

Introduction

There's Something About Practices . . .

Practice has become a common keyword in the academic study of culture and media. This recourse to practices happens for different reasons, but it mainly addresses "what people do to media" or, particularly relevant in this article, "what people are making together in relation to media." This perspective forces attention away from texts or structures onto what people are actually doing, or at least what they say they do (Couldry, 2011).

A sort of practice approach has thus come to the fore in digital media research. Although rarely elaborated (I will treat the theorization of practices below), the notion of practice is often at the core of current definitions of media and culture. To name just a few examples, Gitelman (2007), discussing the newness of new media, defines the communicational dimension of media as a cultural practice. Jenkins adopted this definition to refer to media as cultural systems—"layers within an ever more complicated information and entertainment stratum" that are thus differentiated from technological delivery systems (Jenkins, 2006, pp. 13–14). Subsequently, Jenkins (2010) applied the expression "clusters of practices" to

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Date submitted: 2012–03–12

creative communities in DIY media production, indicating the significant role the notion of practice acquires in debates on media literacy, expertise, social learning, and shared knowledge, where it contributes to understandings ranging from "affinity spaces" (Gee, 2007) to, more explicitly, "communities of practice" (Wenger, 1998). Furthermore, Dena (2010) labeled her approach to transmedia design and production "transmedia practice," drawing on Kress and Van Leeuwen's (2001) semiotic notion of domains of practice, which distinguishes between four different domains of meaning-making in multimodal texts: discourse, design, production, and distribution. Finally, Carpentier's (2011) study of media and participation emphasizes the importance of practices and communities when discussing the role of organizations (and their alternatives) in media production. To summarize this practice approach, I refer to Hills' definition of culture as a

> series of spatially and temporally bounded, but still everyday, practices through which self-identity is generated against 'mainstream' or 'parental' others. . . . Culture in this definition amounts to routinized ways of doing things and ways of thinking about the world that work to define a specific, substantial community against other groups. (Hills, 2005, p. 15)

As I will show, this last quote is already introducing certain key features of practice theory.

. . . and About Participation

A practice approach to the study of media and culture, as introduced above, seems particularly useful in a context of expansive cultural productivity at all levels. One of the most popularized expressions referring to this environment is "participatory culture" (Jenkins, 2003), defined in terms of "low barriers to artistic expression and civic engagement, strong support for creating and sharing one's creations . . . informal mentorship . . . members [who] believe their contributions matter, and feel some degree of social connection with one another" (Jenkins, 2010, p. 238). However, Jenkins' position has generated controversy about the actual scope of participatory culture, its interdependences with established media power structures (Deuze, 2008), and his own conceptualization of participation (Fuchs, 2011a, 2011b). As Deuze states, not all participation is the same, nor is it equally distributed across user groups or media forms:

> [M]uch of this participatory culture is heavily regulated, constrained or embedded within company processes and practices that strive to "harness" rather than "unleash" participation. . . . Thus, the role participation plays in the media industries' move online can be seen as an expression of the convergence of production and consumption cultures . . . as well as in the corporate appropriation of the technology. (Deuze, 2008, p. 31)

An example of this observation is the extensive use of the term "crowd" as an all-purpose tag to refer to any kind of collective engagement in processes of media production. As I will demonstrate, popular "crowd" terms in media, like crowdsourcing and crowdfunding, do not encompass the diversity of creative practices involved in participatory media production and often, in fact, do not count as

participatory at all (see Literat, 2012; Roig, Sánchez-Navarro, & Leibovitz, 2012). Controversies aside, in this article the notion of participatory culture is relevant for highlighting participation as the key feature of contemporary cultural production.

This article is organized as follows: Having already outlined some preliminary considerations regarding practice and participatory culture, I will introduce my specific area of study, that is, participatory creative projects. I will then proceed to focus on the theorization of practice, and particularly on the elements that are most relevant to research on media production. Subsequently, I will illustrate the application of this practice perspective in two specific cases of community-based filmmaking projects: *A Swarm of Angels* (UK) and *Star Wreck/Iron Sky* (Finland). Finally, I will offer some concluding remarks on the potential and challenges of participatory media production through the lens of a practice theory perspective.

Participatory Creative Projects

A growing body of practice-related literature addresses user-generated content and online creative communities, but engagement in participatory media projects has received little attention. Their emphasis on human activity and creative communities—or collectives—underlines the potential of a practice approach to the study of participatory forms of media production. As the case analysis section will show, complex social interrelations emerge around collective involvement in these long-term, demanding cultural enterprises. Thus it is easy observe how individuals develop strong affective ties to projects they feel personally related to, either as socially engaged citizens (as in some participatory documentaries) or as media enthusiasts (as in some fan-related movies or crowdsourced films). Some noteworthy examples from the former category are *The Age of Stupid* (2009), *Collapsus* (2010), *Prison Valley* (2010), *Highrise* (still in development) or *Life in a Day* (2010); the latter includes, to name only a few, *Star Wars Uncut* (2010) and its "sequel" *The Empire Strikes Back Uncut* (2012), *The Cosmonaut* (2012), *Iron Sky* (2012), and *Lost Zombies* (2012). Technologies and platforms for media creation, collaboration, and distribution are of course instrumental in this expression of participatory culture, as are the social and cultural values assigned to digital creativity, particularly when it relates to film and television production. Many calls for participation therefore take the form of an invitation to be part of something unique that has traditionally taken place "behind closed doors," leading to overambitious statements that entice participants to "make history," to become "coproducers" or "codirectors," or to feel personally—if vicariously—connected to celebrities (e.g., Kevin Spacey, Paul Verhoeven, Ridley Scott, or Lars von Trier).

Beyond rhetoric, delimiting the notion of participatory creation is no easy task, not least because of the inherent complexity of "participation" itself. Creative practices like filmmaking are necessarily complex, expensive cultural endeavors dependent on the collaboration of different creative agents. In this context, it is entirely unsurprising that not all "calls to participation" are genuine (many are actually not). Taking elements from Jenkins' cultural approach, but also from participatory democratic theory (Carpentier, 2011; Pateman, 1970) and participatory art (Bishop, 2004; Literat, 2012), I define participatory creation as opening some decision-making processes to a loose collective of participants who gain recognition as practitioners through their engagement in a creative practice.

Many implications derive directly and indirectly from this broad definition; they are summarized below in Tables 1 and 2. Concerning a project's initial stages, it is key to note that a participatory project can be either the task of a creative core team (what Literat calls the "alpha artist") or the self-organizational effort of a community. Therefore, participatory projects are not at odds with specific expressions of leadership and creative vision from a core team. Moreover, enrollment should be unrestrictive and practitioners mostly self-selected through a personal compromise of engagement.[1] This also implies that a call for specific expertise is neither a requirement for nor an obstacle to considering a project participatory, although most participatory projects are open to a broad range of enthusiasts with different backgrounds and talents.[2] It is also crucial to note that participatory projects tend to appear connected to broader social and cultural phenomena, like social activism, free culture movements, games, or fandom. Meanwhile, one must not overlook the fact that participatory discourses have also been co-opted by brands and media companies. All these social, cultural, and economic connections shape the "constitutive rules" of the practices of participatory creation of media products.

As for development, participatory projects tend to offer clearly defined goals and milestones across their different phases. Their most important feature may be their inextricable connection to decision making, that is, their distribution of creative control, which in turn implies the existence of spaces for negotiation and debate. From this key starting point, different degrees of participation become identifiable on a spectrum from minimization to maximization of participation (Carpentier, 2011). It follows that a participatory endeavor implies transparency and mutual recognition among participants (Deuze, 2008), and that to ensure such relations a participatory project should promote communication not only between the creative core and the rest of participants but among all practitioners. Thus participatory projects tend to foster specific creative communities based on collaboration, leading to mutual support networks (following Jenkins, 2010, p. 233). Transparency also means that participatory creative projects tend to release tools and resources as means of instrumental productivity (Wirman, 2009)—in other words, these projects open their own procedures to help others acquire know-how and use it in other projects. By incorporating the aforementioned elements, participatory projects tend to develop strategies for ensuring the continuity of the practice over time, beyond the scope of a particular initiative.

Certain additional features frequently connected to the notion of participatory projects can indeed constitute a valuable contribution but should approached with some caution for purposes of analysis. First, asking people to contribute to a project (in terms of labor or money, even if rewards or tokens are given in exchange) is an insufficient condition of participation. Thus crowdsourced or crowdfunded projects are not necessarily participatory (Roig, Sánchez-Navarro, & Leibovitz, 2012), although some crowdfunded projects that transcend a mere reward-for-money system can foster a meaningful creative relationship

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[1] "Gated membership," in which enrollment in a participatory process is tied to a (usually monetary) contribution, has been a contentious issue.

[2] According to this specification, Blender movie projects, which aim to produce films experimenting with the possibilities of the open-source creative tool Blender, are not considered participatory filmmaking, as they select only a small number of participants from among the most skilled members of the Blender community and proceed under tight creative control.

between supporters and the creative core, which could be analyzed in terms of the elements mentioned above. On the other hand, releasing a creative project under an open license allowing appropriation and remixing is also insufficient, unless it is an integral part of a participatory project. In view of the previous statements, it must also be said—contrary to some widespread discourses, and despite the importance of engagement—that just making people feel part of the project is not a sufficient condition in itself; nor is engaging people in a multimodal experience, as in a transmedia project (which is not to deny the potential of the combination of transmedia and the participatory).

Furthermore, cocreation, understood as an agreement between a promoter entity and a collective of engaged users to contribute specifically to significant parts of a creative project, shares many features with participatory projects, mainly decision making, transparency, and mutual recognition (Banks & Potts, 2010; Deuze, 2008). However, cocreative projects may involve restricted membership and also require certain tangible user-driven outcomes, which have further implications for the meaningfulness of contribution, ownership, and rights. These projects can thus differ considerably from strictly participatory projects. Finally, all these strategies for opening creative processes should—at least ideally—result in different kinds of cultural products and at the same time have a social impact, encouraging further initiatives to explore alternatives and advances in cultural production.

The following tables summarize my position regarding participatory projects. Table 1 assembles the key contributory focal points for analysis of participatory projects, which influence the set of conditions depicted in Table 2. This second table establishes a distinction between "necessary conditions" for considering a creative project strictly participatory; "ideal conditions," which are not necessary but are seen as desirable; and "related conditions," which embody some popular notions that can be identified in some participatory projects but also can lead to misconceptions, as they do not constitute a sufficient condition in themselves.

Table 1. Contributory Focal Points in Participatory Projects.

Contributory focal points	Project goals, outcomes, and milestones
	Leadership and power relations
	Promoters and backers
	Degrees of expertise required
	Means of distribution
	Broader social, economic, and cultural connections
	Construction of affective engagement with the project

Source: Author.

Table 2. Conditions of Participatory Creative Projects.

Necessary conditions	Ideal conditions	Related conditions
Unrestricted membership	Creative communities	Crowdfunding (money)
Self-selection of participants	Mutual support networks among participants	Crowdsourcing (labor, tasks)
Distribution of control (decision-making processes)		Open licensing and remix
	Creative contribution to significant parts	Sense of belonging
Spaces of negotiation		
Transparency	Explicit collaboration conditions with project promoters	Multimodal experience
Mutual recognition	Ownership	
	Differentiated cultural products	
	Instrumental productivity	
	Embedded forms of re-appropriation	
	Continuity over time	

Source: Author.

These tables offer valuable insight into the main features of participatory creative projects. However, such a project must not be taken as an "either/or" logical proposition. There is a gray area where projects that could in essence count as participatory become identifiable despite the near absence of some necessary conditions. I will show this to be the case in *Iron Sky*, where distribution of creative control was arguable, at the very least.

Now that I have introduced this article's main concepts—the practice approach and participatory projects—I will present an overview of theories of practice that will serve to analyze participatory phenomena.

Practice in Theory

Practice is indeed a very abstract, ambiguous term. Despite its wide use, or maybe because of that, it tends to be taken for granted, leading to conceptual misunderstandings. First, it is important to recall two different common meanings applied to the word practice: the actual execution of a plan or method (i.e., as opposed to theory) and the "customary or expected procedure or way of doing something" (Oxford Dictionary of English, 2010), which is usually applied to describe specific fields of professional activity (what we call professional practice or praxis). Taking this second meaning further, practices emerge as the more elemental components of the social. On this basis, this article adopts a preliminary, simplified consideration of practices as sets of interconnected and routinized everyday activities carried out by human agents. This section will treat the notion of practice and the ways its theorization contributes to better understanding of participatory projects.

Approaching culture and society as practices is nothing new. This intellectual interest is traceable to essential 20th-century philosophers and sociologists, from Durkheim (1915), Heidegger (1962), and Wittgenstein (1968) to Bourdieu (1977), Foucault (1979), Giddens (1979), De Certeau (1984), and Turner (1995). Their important contributions have helped to shape a more specific theoretical and methodological corpus on social practices. These theorizations of practice are identifiable in different branches of social theory, from cognitivism to Marxism and functionalism, which all locate everyday practices at the very center of sociality.

Postill (2011) adopts the term *practice theory* to refer to the work of a "second wave" of practice theorists in social science, particularly Schatzki (1996), whom Wittgenstein's conceptualization of practice influenced deeply. Indeed, Schatzki has been influential in the shaping of a culturalist approach to practices, evident in the work of contemporary authors in the fields of consumption (Moisander, Könkkölä, & Laine, 2012; Warde, 2005), social theory (Reckwitz, 2002; Swidler, 2001), philosophy of science (Knorr-Cetina, 2001), or media studies (Ardevol et al., 2011; Couldry, 2011). This article uses this interdisciplinary body of work on practices as a theoretical and methodological tool in the study of contemporary cultural production. To this end, I will use practice theory as a conventional denomination, while acknowledging that there is no unique approach to the theorization of practices.

Drawing from Schatzki's conceptualization of social practices (1996), Reckwitz offers a concise definition of practice as a

> [R]outinized type of behaviour which consists of several elements, interconnected to one other: forms of bodily activities, forms of mental activities, "things" and their use, a background knowledge in the form of understanding, know-how, states of emotion and motivational knowledge. A practice—a way of cooking, of consuming, of working, of investigating, of taking care of oneself or of others, etc.—forms so to speak a "block" whose existence necessarily depends on the existence and specific inter-connectedness of these elements, and which cannot be reduced to any one of these single elements. (Reckwitz, 2002, pp. 249–250)

More specifically, Schatzki refers to an organized set of bodily and mental activities that form an inextricable assemblage—constituted by understandings of what has to be done and what has to be said, the rules or instructions that regulate them, and the teleo-affective structures that orient them—that is an emotional component of satisfaction and desire (Schatzki 1996, p. 89). More simply, three identifiable main components lie behind all practices, if to different extents: understandings related to the practice, explicit rules (or procedures) of the practice, and finally, affectivity (motivations, emotions, goals, beliefs, moods, engagement) linked to the practice (Schatzki, 1996, p. 89; see also Reckwitz, 2002, p. 250; Warde, 2005, p. 134).

Schatzki distinguished two main types of practices: *dispersed* practices and *integrative* practices. Dispersed practices—simple practices scattered across social life—are characterized as sets of doings and sayings oriented mainly to social understandings. Such practices include explaining, describing, asking, examining, greeting, obeying or supposing. Schatzki insists that dispersion does not mean isolation; thus a dispersed practice can help constitute another, for example, asking in relation to replying. On the other hand, *integrative* practices constitute particular domains of social life. Some examples are agricultural, culinary, educational, or filmmaking practices. Schatzki does not regard integrative practices as mere collections of dispersed practices, since the latter are often transformed upon becoming part of an integrative practice. For instance, the dispersed practices of asking and replying are overtly transformed when they become part of educational practices. Moreover, an integrative practice can become part of, or be tightly linked to, another integrative practice (like filmmaking and play in relation to *machinima*, which can be broadly defined as the production of linear audiovisual content from a computer-generated virtual environment, such as a videogame or a virtual world).

Integrative practices are useful in identifying both differences and connections between different meanings of the term practice. Thus, the more abstract notion of practice as opposed to theory is commonly used to embody the whole set of capabilities that make up the appropriate way to carry out a specific professional activity (i.e., praxis), as is obvious in highly regulated fields like law, psychology or medicine but equally applicable to any kind of complex practices, like those belonging to the field of cultural production. Therefore, any complex practice can be seen as a domain of social life—a set of interconnected practices subject to explicit rules and regulations, as well as implicit rules that shape what is considered the "right" way to do things in specific contexts. This "right way" defines normativity, hierarchies among participants, and expectations, and once a practice is established it tends to be tacitly accepted as natural. This article will show how the observation of emerging practices is crucial in participatory projects' early stages, when participants are negotiating meanings related to hierarchies, internal organization, relationship with other cultural domains (i.e., free culture movement, fandom), leaderships, and affective ties.

Consequently, practices are neither strictly established nor stable. Instead they are socially and culturally constructed, and governed by rules both explicit and implicit. Moreover, a complex practice that is deeply interrelated with other domains of social life, as also stated in Bourdieu's theory of fields,[3] is at

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[3] Bourdieu defines fields as specialist domains of practice.

the same time constituted by other practices ranged on a continuum from elemental dispersed practices, like asking questions or interpreting data, to more specific integrative practices like design, postproduction, financing, or marketing. Finally, a practice approach holds practitioners to be those who are "enacting" the practice. This means acknowledging all the agents involved as participants, that is, professionals and users alike.

Practices and the Everyday

Most theoretical approaches emphasize the routine, ordinary dimension of practices. In an accurate summary of the more orthodox conceptualization of practices, Christensen and Ropke (2011) offer the following criteria for identification:

- Bodily-mental activities (individual and social interactions) are routinized and repetitive.

- Activities incorporate components such as understanding, know-how, states of emotion, motivational knowledge, and usually also objects, which are all interconnected.

- Interconnected activities and components are perceived as meaningful entities in a given society or culture. (Christensen & Ropke, 2011, p. 238)

This emphasis on routine explains why debates on media practices tend to focus on mainstream media consumption and sometimes overlook transformative practices related to media, like remixing or cocreation. Bearing in mind that social practices are everyday and usually routine, researchers need to consider how people engage in creative practices, that is, how they deal with a complex object that is not, at least at first, routine. Knorr-Cetina (2001) adopts a practice approach to explain interaction with non-routinized objects through what she calls object-oriented or creative practices. For Knorr-Cetina, this situation entails a complex unfolding object in a brand-new situation, be it a scientific object of study, a technological device, a body/mind technique to be mastered, a cultural object like a video game, or a media project. This interaction generates new practices to overcome the challenge. Knorr-Cetina is not suggesting that routinization and repetition leave the picture—both are essential to this process of domestication. But these kinds of practices also hold plenty of room for creativity, improvisation, self-improvement, frustration, pleasure, and affective engagement. Overall it seems that in these creative practices, the practitioner is trying to achieve the psychological balance between competence and challenge that Csikszentmihalyi (1996) calls *flow*, a state typically used to exemplify our engagement (and disengagement) with games.

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with their own logic that are constituted by a unique combination of species of capital; for example, financial capital, symbolic capital (prestige, renown) or social capital ('connections'). . . . [In a field] . . . differently positioned practitioners compete and cooperate over the same prizes and rewards: money, pleasure, recognition and so on. . . . [Furthermore, some fields have] . . . tangible effect on other fields." (Bourdieu in Postill, 2011, pp. 7–8, 16)

Organization of Practices

Practices are internally organized through three main components: understandings, procedures, and affectivity. This third component justifies interest in practices from consumption studies (Warde, 2005). A practice analysis should thus consider motivations for engagement, affective relations and beliefs associated with the practice and expected rewards.

Practices are also interconnected, necessitating interrogation of the external organization of practices and power relations. Swidler (2001) argues that some practices anchor, control, or organize others, pointing to a possible hierarchy among practices. For Swidler, the power of these *anchoring* practices lies in their bond to constitutive rules, that is, implicit rules that stay in the background yet are essential to define what the practice is about and thus produce normativity. Although determining the extent to which some practices can control others via implicit rules is highly problematic, certain anchoring practices and constitutive rules are identifiable and empirically observable, particularly in early stages of the practice and in moments of conflict and change. In such moments, participants' different motivations and expectations can collide, leading to conflict but also to negotiation to try to restore a shared vision of what the practice means for its participants.

Reproduction and Innovation

Notably, though practices have been regarded merely as "repeated ritual confirmations that something is indeed what it is" (Swidler, 2001, p. 89), they llend themselves to both reproduction and innovation. As Warde (2005) graphically describes, a set of established understandings, procedures and objectives exists in a practice at all times, acting as formal and informal codification that governs and conducts the practice, often without much reflection or conscious awareness on the part of participants. It constitutes the basis for reproduction of the practice, accounting for its considerable inertia through time. But at the same time,

> performances in the same practice are not always the same. . . . Conventions will usually be to some degree contested, with some practitioners typically still attached to prior codes of conduct, while others, perhaps of a new generation, seek to replace current orthodoxies with new prescriptions. . . . Practices also contain the seeds of constant change. They are dynamic by virtue of their own internal logic of operation, as people in myriad situations adapt, improvise and experiment. (Warde, 2005, pp. 140–141)

Like Knorr-Cetina's notion of object-oriented practices, Warde's work acknowledges that practices, though everyday and inertial, are not necessarily routine, homogeneous, repetitive, or stable through time.

**Practice Theories in Practice: The Case of Community-Based
Participatory Film Production**

This section will outline some results of research on participatory forms of film production using practice theory as a theoretical-methodological tool. The research examined practices taking place in participatory environments where a community is fostered or forms informally around the development of a film project. Of particular interested were how the interrelation between different roles like "producers" and "audiences" changed, and how processes and their outcomes could configure an alternative to traditional production models. We selected two groundbreaking case-examples of participatory filmmaking: the British open-source film project *A Swarm of Angels*, and the trajectory of the Finnish collective Energia Productions, promoters of the fan film parody *Star Wreck* and the science fiction comedy feature *Iron Sky*.

To gain thorough insight into the cases, the research devoted special attention to the early stages. Then, practice is less routine and normative, or undergoing change, which facilitates observation of the external organization of practices and their implicit rules. Thus each case was approached as an organizational form, that is, part community but also alternative organization (Carpentier, 2011, p. 221–222). All its public manifestations, from websites to blogs, press, specialized forums, social media and offline events, were observed. Official sources, which represent the perspective of the creative core, and unofficial sources received equal attention. Once this framework was established, the focus turned to the organization of practices in participation spaces: structure of discussion threads, processes of decision making and meritocracy, emergence of recognized members, statistics on actual participation, identification of different domains (community organization, project development, content production, and promotion), and contributions to the creative community. From there, it became possible to outline a set of practices and identify the key features of its production model.

After briefly presenting both cases, the next section will discuss them in the light of practice theory and contrast the results with the wider proposal of conditions for participatory creative projects.

A Swarm of Angels (UK)

A Swarm of Angels (*ASoA*) is a film project promoted by digital entrepreneur Matt Hanson. Set up in 2006, it aimed to build a community for the collaborative development of an open-source science-fiction movie from scratch. Collective action to redefine filmmaking production processes was therefore considered as important as the final product. After two years of intense activity, in 2009 *ASoA* went into hiatus—though it was not officially canceled—after working on two screenplays, designing different visual concepts, and experimenting with participation strategies, like releasing a teaser or fostering a user-generated documentary on the community. Registered members of the community called themselves Angels, and a playful appropriation of the Christian angelic hierarchy and imagery was extensively used to identify the community. The conceptualization of *ASoA* was clearly the work of a single man, but it was conceived as a cultural experiment reliant on community decision-making to shape the project's processes and outcomes. Thus, though not in a "pure" form, *ASoA* can be considered a community-driven project. Table 3 summarizes key areas of interest in *ASoA* by identifying contributory focal points:

Table 3. Contributory Focal Points in ASoA.

A SWARM OF ANGELS	
Project goals	Community-developed, open-source fiction feature with Creative Commons license (by-nc-sa) scheduled for an online release
Leadership and power relations	Clearly identifiable leadership, open creative core, meritocracy, rewards chosen by community
Promoters and backers	Community drivenness, gated community, renowned supporters
Degrees of expertise required	No prerequisites, specialized calls
Means of distribution	Internet, Creative Commons license (embedded in project goals), day and date event
Broader social, economic, and cultural connections	Free culture, open-source movement, remix culture, independent filmmaking, entrepreneurship

Source: Author.

Energia Productions/Iron Sky (Finland)

Energia Productions is the company name adopted in 2006 by the Finnish team behind the popular fan film *Star Wreck: In the Pirkinning* (2005), considered the first feature film freely distributed on the Internet. The team's collective interest in its work sparked the collaborative strategy behind its first commercial film project, *Iron Sky,* a science-fiction comedy based on an original screenplay and coproduced by different production companies from Finland, Germany, and Australia. An initial level of participation grew via the Iron Sky website, which featured calls for viral promotion, screening demands, and collective financing, as well as merchandise, premium content, remixing contests, and so on. Furthermore, community participation moved quickly from the *Star Wreck* forums to a new social moviemaking platform, Wreckamovie.com, developed for *Iron Sky* but open to any project. Thus, Wreckamovie users are invited to contribute to tasks in any projects available in the platform, or start their own. Significantly, the main reason behind that move was to avoid possible legal issues with community contributions, as the platform's end-user agreement clearly states. After almost seven years of development, *Iron Sky*'s worldwide theatrical release took place in 2012, and a crowdfunded sequel is in the works. Tables 4 and 5 summarize contributory factors for both *Star Wreck: In the Pirkinning* and *Iron Sky*:

Table 4. Contributory Focal Points for the **Star Wreck** *Project.*

STAR WRECK: IN THE PIRKINNING	
Project goals	Fiction feature developed by closed amateur team with strong support of a community
Leadership and power relations	Clearly identifiable leadership and creative core
Promoters and backers	Independently developed in-house, self-financed by core team
Degrees of expertise required	No prerequisites; calls for promotion and subtitling
Means of distribution	Free streaming and download;[4] due to increased demand, two different DVD editions with additional content and some TV screenings
Broader social, economic, and cultural connections	Fandom, science fiction, Creative Commons, popular cinema, spoof cinema, DIY film saga

Source: Author.

Table 5. Contributory Focal Points for Iron Sky Project.

IRON SKY	
Project goals	Commercial fiction feature developed by professional team with strong support of a community through collaborative platform
Leadership and power relations	Clearly identifiable leadership and creative core
Promoters and backers	Private investors, crowdfunding
Degrees of expertise required	No prerequisites, calls for specific suggestions and tasks
Means of distribution	Traditional window system (theater, DVD/BR, television), added value items (game, collectors' edition)
Broader social, economic, and cultural connections	Fandom, science fiction, independent cinema, popular cinema

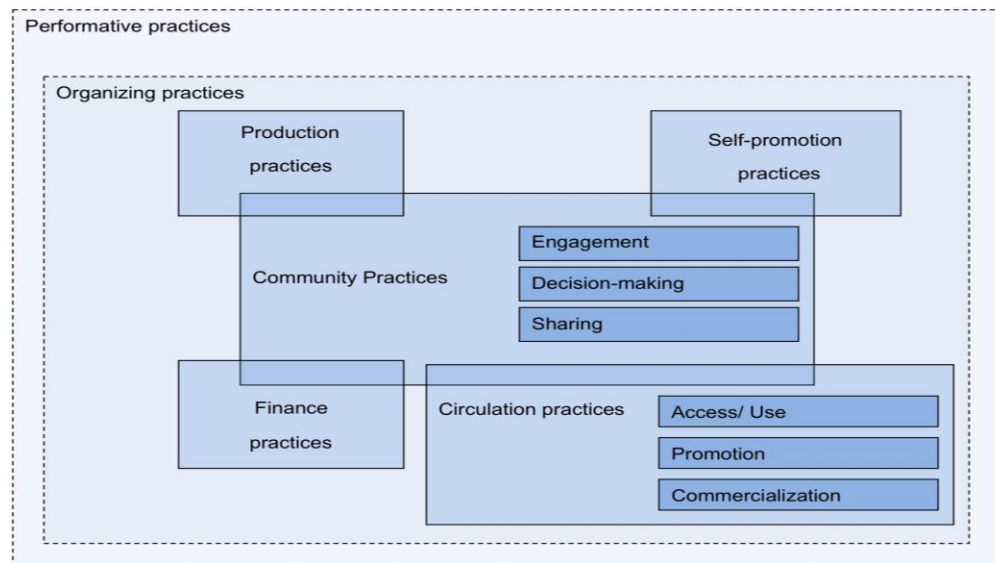*Source: Author.*

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[4] Download currently available only through http://archive.org/details/StarWreckInThePirkining

Case Analysis

The two cases have an identical starting point: a creative core launched a film project in which fostering a community played an essential part. However, there are some significant differences, one of them quite defining: *A Swarm of Angels* was born as a participatory experiment where a growing community was expected to shape all the aspects of the project, although under close supervision.[5] On the other hand, the team at Energia Productions harnessed the commitment of an active community of interest that had formed around their previous amateur creative efforts, the *Star Wreck* parody saga and particularly its 2005 installment, the Internet cult phenomenon *Star Wreck: In the Pirkinning*, in order to engage its members in the team's forthcoming, more ambitious project. *Iron Sky* involved plenty of playful offers for participants—even if they had very little real impact on the final outcome, which was tightly defined by its creative core of professionalized producers.

Figure 1 offers a visual introduction to the set of dispersed and integrative practices observed through analysis, which I will refer to below:

Figure 1. Sets of Practices in Participatory Filmmaking Projects.

Source: Author.

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[5] Hanson himself referred to *A Swarm of Angels* as a "gated community."

A practice analysis of both cases revealed a set of integrative practices, that is, specialized domains aimed at the instrumental development of the creative project. These practices were easily identified according to the understandings and procedures necessary to carry them out: production organization, design, screenwriting, promotional content, technology, distribution, music, and so on. However, the different degrees of connection to a creative community strengthened affectivity issues related to motivations, goals, or community engagement. The more the community was in control of a practice, the more transformative options took place, owing to changes in dispersed practices coming from community interrelations. Hence, even though similar integrative practices were observed in both cases, *ASoA* featured identifiable spaces for negotiation and, in some cases, innovation.

The main integrative practices observed were:

(a) *Production practices* oriented to decisions and actions regarding actual content production, from screenwriting to design, storyboarding, scoring, and of course the shooting of any kind of media (from promotional material to actual footage for the project).

It could seem obvious that production practices would be the main motivation to become a member of a filmmaking community. This may be the case over time; however, participants invested much time and effort in other practices not strictly related to production, at least at the beginning. One of the main problems in *ASoA* was that whereas production practices were conceived as a long-term goal connected to scriptwriting and planning, participants wanted more options to materialize their interest in producing content sooner, whether or not it was part of the final product. This was the key reason behind the call for the creation of a collaborative documentary related to the project. In *Iron Sky*, participatory practices were delimited to the Wreckamovie platform through different specific calls concerning minor issues (promotional taglines, titling, ideas for visualization of a Moonbase or future Earth, etc.).

(b) *Financing practices* involving the financial support for the project and present from the very beginning in debates and community resolutions.

Some examples revolve around subscription models (the option *ASoA* adopted), merchandising, crowdfunding strategies (broadly defined as collective micro-financing, extensively used for *Iron Sky*), sponsorship, deals with broadcasting companies, and the like. Some of the practices were closely connected to constitutive rules and tended to be frequent objects of controversy, as they wound up tension between the commercial and alternative/experimental sides of the projects. In *ASoA*, the commitment to a subscription model signaled an initial attempt to protect the project from external investment (public or private), which would have been considered a compromise or sell-out at odds with the open-source nature of the endeavor (instead, open-source and free culture acted as constitutive rules). In *Iron Sky*, however, this compromise was much vaguer, opening a wider range of financial options that made *Iron Sky* a hybrid, presented as an independent commercial feature with an alternative creative process. In this case, two main funding strategies stood out: the "Ward Bonds" initiative (2008), a merchandising campaign carefully crafted around the World War II propaganda aesthetics of the movie; and a crowdfunding campaign across different platforms, the self-defining "Race for 300,000 €," which ultimately did not come close to its ambitious goal.

(c)   Circulation practices concerned with decisions and actions regarding access, licensing, distribution, promotion, or commercialization of content.

Circulation practices are indeed closely related to financing (as in the case of pre-sells to broadcasters or DVD/BR licensing) and both types of practice connect equally closely to the constitutive rules that account for the legitimacy of the project as a form of community/alternative-media organization. However, here they are assigned to a separate category because of particularities in terms of copyright, distribution strategies, and participants' engagement in diffusion. Again, the two cases differed substantially: *ASoA* was open source in nature, whereas the creative core behind *Iron Sky* adopted a strategy of revealing a lot from the production process as a part of the commitment to keep circulation practices as open as possible, combining traditional theatrical release with on-demand screenings run through the Iron Sky website.

(d)   Self-promotion practices, a particularly important set of practices around the promotion of the organizational form itself, as distinct from promotion of the film proper.

These practices exist because of the need to engage participants over time. By emphasizing the qualities and values of the organization or "brand," such as its "authenticity," "innovation," "relevance," and "radical departure" from traditional production, the practices legitimize its activity and pave the way for continuity, not ruling out professionalization. Crucially, the process is, in the end, as much or even more important than the actual feature film. In both cases, but particularly in *Star Wreck/Iron Sky*, self-promotion practices acquired an important performative and playful dimension.

(e)   Community practices focused in different ways on the participants as a collective. Tightly bound to all other kinds of practice, community practices fall into several subcategories identified through the analysis:

- *Informal engagement* to keep the community active and engaged, upholding the mutual compromise essential to any community. Key to transparency, these practices tend to be encouraged by the creative core. Some typical examples are disclosure of information on the progress and milestones of the project.

- *Collective agency and decision making* to foster contribution to decision-making processes and thus proximity to production practices. Again, project promoters are essential to keeping it rolling and are, as previous sections mentioned, key for creative recognition.

- *Knowledge and expertise exchange* focused on social capital inside the community. A direct consequence of the emergence of affinity spaces, these practices are usually created and maintained by members without need of the core team's active participation. They concern different interests in adjacent fields like technology, filmmaking, music, and so on, which brings participants closer to learning communities, communities of practice, and communities of interest.

Besides this set of integrative practices, the research identified two transverse practices that would account as dispersed practices. They can easily go unnoticed, particularly as a project becomes more mature, but they shape and influence the rest of the practices from the very beginning:

(f)   *Organizing practices*, self-reflexive or "meta-" practices oriented to general organization and the establishment of explicit rules, hierarchies, meritocracy, and discussion of expected rewards, which become an intense source of normativity. It was possible to delve into these organizing practices because the cases were observed from their earlier stages. In consolidated communities, these practices may seem invisible and "naturalized" because they are constituted at the very beginning and only contested at moments of conflict and change. These practices reveal what the participatory condition of a media project really is, and whether the organization is oriented to maximalist or minimalist forms of participation (Carpentier, 2011, p. 215). Debates over every relevant aspect were an intrinsic feature of the *ASoA* project. Thus the community thoroughly discussed all processes, from the open-source nature of *ASoA* to rewards for participation, promotional activities, technology, financing, or voting. Another example of negotiation and innovation in the *ASoA* community was the experiment of developing two independent screenplays at once, the first managed by the creative core and the second one more community-managed. Contrary to initial expectations, the community-based, open-ended screenplay forum ended up much more active and fruitful (Roig, 2008).

(g)   *Performative practices*. Most participatory projects include a framework for performative expression and possess a playful dimension that opens the practices to practitioners who need not have the specific technical skills required in professionalized environments. Participants are invited to play at being filmmakers, and also to play with the aura of filmmaking and its processes and imaginaries. The dynamics of these playful practices represent playing *with* the rules as much as playing *by* the rules, thus clearing the way to the transformative and innovative. As stated previously, in the case of *ASoA*, project leader Matt Hanson played extensively with the metaphor of the angelic hierarchy in organizing an open participatory process, and the most relevant call for participation asked the Angels to record videos about their engagement in the project, with minimum technical requirements. For its part, *Iron Sky* took advantage of its parodic condition as a movie made in Finland about Nazis coming from the Moon to invade Earth in 2018. Fruitfully exploiting the imaginary of World War II propaganda, the project issued hilarious calls to action, attracting participants to remix teasers, demand to see *Iron Sky* in different countries, fund the movie, or buy merchandising. In the Wreckamovie platform, collaboration is structured in tasks open to anyone regardless of filmmaking skill (many of them, actually not much more than playful brainstorming exercises).

I now return to Figure 1 and connect it to Table 2. This linking of the case analyses of practices with the theoretical approach to participatory projects reveals the importance of transverse dispersed practices—in these cases, organizing and performative practices—in shaping the necessary, ideal, and related conditions for participation. Because these sets of practices embody constitutive rules and act as anchoring practices, it is essential, in order to get an insight of the phenomenon to analyze the early stages of a project and, additionally, critical moments of conflict and change in its course (Roig, San Cornelio, Ardèvol, & Sánchez-Navarro, in press). An important, final point is that actual expressions of

integrative practices like production, diffusion, or financing, which are anchored in transverse practices, are tangible evidence of a global practice-based approach to media production; meanwhile, community practices say much about ideal conditions of participation and collaboration.

Conclusions

If anything is really "new" in the changing notion of new media, it is the newly emerging media practices. These practices point to a cultural environment that blurs the traditional divide between producers and consumers. Within it, appropriation, re-elaboration, and play abound; cultural experiences are increasingly socialized; participation and co-creation discourses are embedded even in mainstream productions; and engagement is a fundamental element of any creative endeavor. However, that is not to say that these practices necessarily lead to a new participatory production environment. As shown throughout this article, thorough analysis of practices reveals numerous contradictions: in many participatory experiences, participants have no real decision-making power and are treated as privileged target audiences; meanwhile, many allegedly open projects operate under tight creative control. Yet these operations also offer abundant potential for transformation, challenging traditional assumptions about what people are doing *with* and *to* media. As stated above, practices account for innovation and reproduction: New forms of performing a practice can conflict with established ones, fostering a negotiation process with the potential to change the meaning of the practice. Moreover, implicit rules in the background help define what a practice means for the practitioners. These constitutive rules typically only come to the fore in early stages of the practice and at moments of conflict and change.

Throughout, this article has tried to interrogate the idea of the participatory as a sort of empty container expression equivalent to notions like "engagement," "contribution," "experience," or "personalization," which admittedly can assume significant roles under certain conditions. Spaces for negotiation and debate, decision making, transparency processes, and mutual recognition become essential to the consideration of a creative project as participatory. In this sense, practice theory allows researchers greater specificity in investigating the kinds of things individuals are doing in relation to media production, and in relation to each other as practitioners. It does so by accounting for three main components: basic understandings of what the practice is about, procedures (i.e., rules and instructions) that regulate it, and especially the affective elements linked to the practice. Asking what media practices people are involved in allows the focus to move from reception issues—or even mere use, as would be the case for traditional media objects and processes—onto participants, production, and performance.

At the same time, participatory projects expand the reach of practice theory beyond the comfort zone of the everyday. Creative challenges—in which participants, motivated by their own interest in becoming part of a groundbreaking event, put their skills to the test in a long-term process—thus also merit attention. As has been suggested through this article, the act of contributing to an appealing process can be much more important than its final outcome, as it provides opportunities for pleasure, performance, and social peer interaction around a cultural endeavor seen as innovative, socially relevant, and unique. Participatory media projects based on social causes or in fiction owe their strength to the suggestive power of the cinematic imaginary.

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