

**Virtual Worlds Research Workshop
'Making Sense of Virtual Worlds and User Driven Innovation'
Magleas, Denmark – June 2010**

Abstract

**Back to the roots:
What is user-driven innovation?**

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Track: Theory, Concepts and Terminology

„The dynamics of ‚web 2.0‘ and participatory media now ripple out across all sectors of the economy where ‚consumer participation‘ and ‚open innovation‘ have become watchwords for growth. ... ‚Playbour?‘ What are the new labour relations of the voluntary free work provided by the growth of UGC?...“
(CfP for the ‚Access All Areas‘ symposium; 20-21as43 May 2010; Digital Cultures Research Centre, UWE, UK)

User-generation and consumer-participation as well as innovation are terms used a lot in the context of web 2.0 and all related applications. The above call for papers (and many similar texts) suggests that thanks to the involvement of the users traditional approaches are beginning to disappear (or are at least being questioned). Instead, the economy and particularly the media are in turmoil (e.g. Tuomi, 2002). Users rule – and even innovate.

As one of the core concepts in the Virtual Worlds research project, user-driven innovation looks like a logical and appropriate framework for this specific web 2.0 application. It implies both user empowerment and the emergence of the new. Overall, it sounds like ‚the stuff‘ that Second Life and other virtual worlds ‚are made of‘. The project description, for example, states that in this project innovation is understood as a process, as practices. Moreover, these practices are meant to be sense-making strategies (=meaning-generating processes in human construction and practice). This point of view is meant to help to see „potentials that have not yet been realized“. The project assumes that collaborative co-design in virtual worlds is user-driven innovation, because it is actor-driven. It also states that discontinuity is a basis for innovation (as part of the sense-making process). It does not state, however, where exactly the innovation lies. This is therefore the starting point for this

presentation. It wants to explore what exactly user-driven innovation means in the particular context of virtual worlds.

But while the context of virtual worlds promises something new indeed, user-driven innovation has not emerged just now. In combination with virtual worlds, it might promise new insights into the developments behind and processes within the social sphere of virtuality. It might also promise insights into innovation processes in general. The concept of user-driven innovation, however, has been around for quite some time (especially in science and technology environments and/or studies). This concept has recently spread even further: it is now widely used in management and related areas.

„User-Driven Innovation is the process of tapping (explicit and tacit) users' knowledge in order to develop new products, services and concepts. A user-driven innovation process is based on an understanding of true user needs/practices and a more systematic involvement of users“ (Pierson, 2008)

The hope is that users can help to enliven developments that have otherwise stalled. Whether these promises are true, however, is another one of the concerns of the proposed presentation.

It is therefore necessary to first clarify what user-driven innovation signifies. These insights should then be applied to virtual worlds (in particular Second Life).

Structure:

The presentation will begin by first of all revisiting some definitions of innovation. It will try to avoid definitions such as the following, as these are seen as too simplistic:

„Innovation refers to something new or renewed: products or services, processes, organizational forms, financial models, education and training, working space, etc. ... Innovation refers to the continuous improvements and changes that all entities (companies, academic institutions, research facilities...and even the public sector) must make in order to remain competitive. The field of innovation is broad. ... three main categories of innovation: price-driven, research-driven and user-driven.“ (Nordic Council of Ministers, 2006:9)

As with the whole field of user-driven innovation, this perspective is problematic insofar as it focuses primarily on businesses and their idea of user-driven innovation. For the given framework, this is seen as too limited.

In a second step, the presentation would therefore revisit some of the science and technology literature from the 1980s and 1990s (only a small selection).¹ It would trace different approaches there and in the more industry-led literature (from people-created/people-centred to customer-centred or user-centred/user-oriented design or user-driven innovation). Another (market-driven) differentiation is between „the voice of the customer perspective, and the lead-user innovation perspective“ (Nordic Council of Ministers, 2006:13). This would also be outlined briefly.²

Next to general approaches, there are also different ‚schools‘ associated with user-driven innovations, such as the Hasso-Plattner-institutes (one of which is based near Berlin) and those institutes referring to the work of Eric von Hippel (see also Nordic Council of Ministers, 2006). Within these and the industry, diverse pro-active approaches are mostly used. According to Innovaro, these range from personas, ethnography, fan bases³ and participatory design/adaptive design/creative consumers (Innovaro, 2006).⁴ Again, such approaches will briefly be mentioned (always seen in relation and contrast to user-driven innovation means in the context of virtual worlds).

In order to further understand user-driven innovation, some classic examples will also briefly be mentioned. These range from the SMS to mp3 and Facebook. While the technological system behind the SMS, for example, was not a user-invention, its widespread use and the social contexts it was used for (as well as the user-groups it was mostly used by) came rather unexpected.

This example helps to underline an important distinction within user-driven innovation: its best examples emerge within the use and change of existing

¹ The context of these approaches tend to be the late modern perspective on the mutual shaping between users and technologies in diverse social context (so-called social constructivism).

² The lead user idea is also reflected in 1-9-90 rule of user involvement (again to be outlined briefly).

³ The fan bases (also to be found in the participatory design) are clearly linked to the traditional concept of lead users.

⁴ A nice example of this within media studies is Gauntlett's work on Lego's Serious Play (2007).

technologies and applications, while the most widespread form is planned user innovation within the development process in companies. This contrast also frames the most widespread understandings of user-driven innovation (see above). The original products as such are rarely ever user-driven.

The user of virtual worlds within the Virtual Worlds research project is also defined as an actor who is an active co-creator. At the same time, the therein used concept of mediators refers to actors who „transform and not just recreate meaningful experiences, objects, signs and practice“. As a final part of the presentation, these assumptions will be referred back to the user-driven innovations ideas and approaches outlined beforehand. The framework shall serve to answer the question whether user-driven innovation is in fact taking place within Second Life (to be discussed with the Second Life experts present at the workshop).

References:

Gauntlett, David (2007): Creative Explorations. New approaches to identities and audiences. Oxon: Routledge.

Innovaro (2006): Innovation Briefing 09-06: Customer Centred Innovation. <http://www.innovaro.com> (accessed 20/03/2010)

Nordic Council of Ministers (2006): Understanding User-Driven Innovation. Copenhagen: TemaNord.

Pierson, Jo (2008): Users as Innovators. Unpublished presentation in the framework of a COST298 STSM Melbourne workshop. 11. December 2008.

Tuomi, Ilkka (2002): Networks of Innovation: Change and Meaning in the Age of the Internet. New York: Oxford University Press.