

Final Project

**Analyzing the Regulatory Constraints and Chilling Effects of YouTube's Content ID  
Sweep through a Representative Survey of the Nintendo Let's Play Community**

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LSTU-E 120 Internet & Society: Technologies and Politics of Control

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May 11, 2015

One of the most lucrative genres to emerge out of YouTube's unique business model is videogame Let's Plays, which are essentially videogame walkthroughs with an audio overlay of player commentary that typically include parody, product review, and ratings.<sup>1</sup> According to the most current available statistics there are approximately 1000 YouTube channels dedicated to this genre<sup>2</sup> and the median number of video views for the top 500 YouTube gamer's channels is 208 million, with the top ranking Let's Play channel bringing in over 8.4 billion views.<sup>3</sup> As a result of their vast viewership, the LP community is helping to generate a significant market share of YouTube's \$5.6 billion in annual ad revenues.<sup>4</sup> However, after YouTube, and its parent company Google, decided to grow its Partners Program, which was originally initiated to incentivize creators by allowing them to monetize their videos and generate an income,<sup>5</sup> the program eventually formed partner agreements with multichannel networks as well as many of the corporations that sponsor ads, including gaming companies.<sup>6</sup> As these gaming industry partners registered their copyrighted material into the YouTube data base, YouTube's ContentID was able to analyze the videos of independent contributors to find content matches, make claims and potentially divert monetization revenues from the Let's Play video game commentators' videos to the corporate partner copyright claimants, of whose products they had played and reviewed.<sup>7</sup> Still, prior to December 2013 one of the benefits to being a Multichannel Network LP creator was that your videos would not be subjected to ContentID scans. Then, in December 2013 YouTube set up two classifications for MCN's to place their channels under, and while the larger channels, that were designated "Managed," would continue to run under the protected

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<sup>1</sup> Danny Wadson, "Gamertube: PewDiePie and the YouTube commentary revolution," *Polygon.com*, (2013).

<sup>2</sup> Christopher Zoia, "This Guy Makes Millions Playing Video Games on YouTube," *TheAtlantic.com*, (14 March 2014).

<sup>3</sup> "Top 500 YouTubers games Channels," *Socialblade.com*, (15 April 2015).

<sup>4</sup> Tim Worstal, "Google's YouTube Ad Revenues May Hit \$5.6 Billion In 2013," *Forbes.com*, (12 Dec 2013).

<sup>5</sup> John Biggs, "YouTube Launches Revenue Sharing Partners Program, but no Pre-Rolls," *Techcrunch.com*, (2007).

<sup>6</sup> Ian Miles Cheong, "Nintendo Flexing Copyright Clout on YouTube Let's Play Channels," (2013).

<sup>7</sup> Collin Campbell. "YouTube video game shows hit with copyright blitz," *Polygon.com*, (10 Dec 2013).

status, the remaining smaller channels, which were changed to “affiliated,” would have to be scanned through ContentID.<sup>8</sup>

As soon as the affiliated channels had their statuses changed YouTube performed an unprecedented and extensive ContentID sweep against many of its most prolific and faithful content providers in their Let’s Play community.<sup>9</sup> This catastrophic event threatened to alter the landscape of the community as it chipped away at the incomes generated by their channels,<sup>10</sup> because according to YouTube’s guidelines if creators use footage from videogames the copyright owners of the games can choose to claim the ad revenue or have it removed.<sup>11</sup> Since ContentID is an automated system, some claims are legitimate while others may be inaccurate and disputable.<sup>12</sup> After an undisputable match is made a user can file an appeal to be reinstated citing fair use. However as members of this community have pointed out, “An appeal also carries the risk of prompting the copyright holder to file a copyright strike against [the] video,”<sup>13</sup> via a DMCA takedown notice, and after three copyright strikes the account will be deleted.<sup>14</sup> In the wake of the sweep, some companies have offered guidelines that allow LP creators to continue receiving monetization revenue from their copyrighted titled videos,<sup>15</sup> while others, such as Nintendo, have chosen to divert the advertising revenue from the Let’s Plays of their games.<sup>16</sup> Although many members of the Let’s Play community strongly believe Fair Use doctrine protects their right to create and upload their Let’s Plays, they also understand that under YouTube’s current guidelines companies, such as Nintendo, have been given the right to divert

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<sup>8</sup> Owen Good, “YouTube’s Copyright Crackdown: Everything You Need to Know,” *Kotaku.com*, (18 Dec 2013).

<sup>9</sup> Campbell (10 Dec 2013).

<sup>10</sup> Michelle Jaworski, “The only angry rant you need to see about YouTube's new copyright policy,” *Dailydot.com*. (2013).

<sup>11</sup> “How Content ID works,” *Google.com* (April 2015). “What is a ContentID claim?,” *Goggle.com* (April 2015).

<sup>12</sup> Theodore Homdrom, *Zelda Fan Takes a Hit from Nintendo’s YouTube Policies*, *Zeldainformer.com*, (28 March 2015).

<sup>13</sup> Homdrom.

<sup>14</sup> Stephen McArthur, “How to Beat a YouTube Content ID Copyright Claim – What every Gamer and MCN Should Know,” *Gamasutra.com*, (24 June 2014).

<sup>15</sup> Microsoft. “Game Content Usage Rules.” *Xbox.com*. (March 2015).

<sup>16</sup> Collin Campbell, “Everything you need to know about the YouTube copyright crisis and why you should care,” *Polygon.com*, (14 Dec 2013).

ad revenues. This has caused many Let's Players including those in the following survey to decrease their output of Nintendo based videos.

As a result of the backlash from their initial ad revenue claims in 2013, Nintendo recently launched a Creators Program, which offers a complicated ad revenue split schedule on a very select list of games to qualifying Nintendo Let's Play creators on YouTube.<sup>17</sup> Although the Nintendo Creators Program ostensibly seems like it offers a fair and equitable arrangement to the Let's Players who focus on reviewing Nintendo products, this survey of representative LP channels reveals that the program is getting a fair amount of resistance from many of the most popular LP creators. Some have even cited fears of the development of a new dichotomy as the program could enable Nintendo to filter out negative LPs.<sup>18</sup> While others have noted that if additional companies follow suit, those that can afford to offer greater incentives will get more exposure, which could be a hardship for smaller indie companies that, under the previous scheme, had greatly benefited from the free publicity they receive.

In an effort to better understand how the Let's Play community is effectually dealing with YouTube's recent architectural changes, which have been enabled by their interrelationship to copyright law, the research framework of this case study focuses on surveying a representative sample of four distinct LP creators' posted videos and related blogs to determine how they have reacted to and dealt with Nintendo's choice to continue diverting ad revenues from Let's Players' content. By isolating the cause and effects of one influential gaming company on the LP community, this study seeks to illustrate how newly emerging social norms and market trends affect the preexisting constraints of YouTube's architectural and legal regulations.<sup>19</sup> Thus making the regulatory challenges of YouTube's Let's Play community an excellent case to

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<sup>17</sup> Nintendo. "About the Nintendo Creators Program." Nintendo.com.

<sup>18</sup> TotalBiscuit, "This video is no longer available: The Day One Garry's Incident Incident," YouTube.com, (20 Oct 2013).

<sup>19</sup> Lawrence Lessig, "What Things Regulate," *Code-Version 2.0*, (Sep 2010).

examine through the lens of Lawrence Lessig’s four interconnected constraints of regulation, which are “the law, social norms, the market, and architecture.”

The First channel, PewDiePie, represents the top tier of channels which, by their share size, are influential leaders of the genre. The second, ZackScottGames, represents those channels that have consistently created LPs based on the top titles of various companies’ games including a significant number from Nintendo. The third, MasaeAnela, represents an exclusively Nintendo channel that is not in the Creators program, while the fourth, Andrewg1990, represents the typical channel that has opted to join the program. By measuring and quantifying the changes in output and content of Nintendo videogame Let’s Plays as compared to other companies titles prior to the YouTube ContentID sweep and after the subsequent Nintendo affiliate policy changes, this survey seeks to evaluate how the Nintendo LP community is dealing with the regulatory restraints and chilling effects of the ContentID sweep and subsequent Nintendo Creators Program.



**PewDiePie** (Felix Kjellberg)<sup>20</sup> Estimated Yearly Earnings: \$1.1-18.3 Million

Views: 8,484,239,192 Network: Polaris (Disney)<sup>21</sup>

Out of Kjellberg’s 224 playlists, 6 are based on Nintendo company games with a total of 33 videos. 28 Nintendo related videos were uploaded prior to the ContentID Crisis, 1 after the crisis but before the Creators Program was announced, and 4 since the Creators Program was launched. Currently, PewDiePie is ranked as the most popular Let’s Player on YouTube. As a managed channel,<sup>22</sup> PewDiePie seems to have been less adversely affected by the ContentID sweep than the channels that had their statuses suddenly changed to affiliate. Still, in the wake of the controversy, Kjellberg announced the launch of his own website PewDiePie.net on which he

<sup>20</sup> PewDiePie, “Channel Home Page,” YouTube.com, (April 2015).

<sup>21</sup> “YouTube Statistics for PewDiePie,” Socialblade.com, (16 April 2015).

<sup>22</sup> Sam Gutelle, “PewDiePie May Leave Maker Studios And Launch His Own Network,” Tubefilter.com, (3 Oct 2014).

is now releasing exclusive LPs that are not on YouTube.<sup>23</sup> Also, in response to the launch of the Nintendo Creators Program, Kjellberg explains, “If I played a Nintendo game on my channel... most of the views/ad revenue would come from the fact that my viewers are subscribed to me. Not necessarily because they want to watch a Nintendo game in particular.”<sup>24</sup> Even though only 2.6% of Kjellberg’s playlists are based on Nintendo titles, the quantity of views, on his videos, are quite astounding. As an example Kjellberg’s three WarioWare LPs have generated over 21 million views. Consequently, Kjellberg’s popularity makes him an influential representative of the genre. As such similarly, high ranking gamers have launched websites where gamers can post exclusive content.<sup>25</sup>

By returning to Lessig’s four forces we are reminded that, “markets regulate behavior in cyberspace [and] these behaviors are all a function of market constraints and market opportunity,”<sup>26</sup> as we can see from the information collected thus far, market opportunities have allowed high ranking channels to earn more ad revenue. In turn they are able to invest their newly acquired funds into founding websites, which allow them to expand their reach beyond the regulatory restraints of YouTube. Although they are still subject to copyright laws they now have the power to control their content and ad revenue stream.



**ZackScottGames** (Zack Scott)<sup>27</sup> Estimated Yearly Earnings: \$111,000 -1.8 Mil.

Views: 786,696,758 Network: Machinima (Warner Bros.)<sup>28</sup>

Out of Scott’s 140 playlists, 38 are based on Nintendo games with a total of 1,167 videos. 852 Nintendo related videos were uploaded prior to the ContentID Crisis, 307 after the crisis but before the Creators Program was announced, and 8 since the Creators Program was

<sup>23</sup> PewDiePie, “SAY MY NAME - (uPDATE vLOG),” YouTube.com, (4 Apr 2014).

<sup>24</sup> PewDie. “Nintendo Sharing YouTube Revenue,” Tumblr.com, (30 Jan 2015).

<sup>25</sup> Normal Boots, (Apr 2015).

<sup>26</sup> Lessig.

<sup>27</sup> ZackScottGames. “Channel Home Page,” youTube.com.

<sup>28</sup> YouTube Statistics for Zack ScottGames. Socialblade.com (11 April 2015).

launched. Considering that nearly one quarter of Scott's LPs are based on Nintendo platform games, his channel was adversely affected by "Nintendo's initial claiming of revenue via YouTube's ContentID system in 2013."<sup>29</sup> Also, Scott pointed out that he believes there are risks and benefits of the Nintendo Creators Program. While he sees the program could be beneficial to newcomers that have never monetized a video before or do not want to be affiliated with a network, he does not think it will work out well for established network affiliated channels because it sets a new precedent when compared to other developers' policies. As Scott explains, "large companies like Sony, Microsoft, Ubisoft, Rovio, and others allow gameplay monetization."<sup>30</sup> However he thinks if they followed Nintendo's lead it would be bad for everyone, because established channels would work harder to promote the companies that pay them more while smaller channels and gaming companies would lose out, especially the indie companies that rely heavily on the free promotion that they've been getting from the LPs of larger channels.<sup>31</sup> As the creator of a moderate sized channel, Scott explains that although he loves Nintendo's systems and games more than any other gaming company's he will not post as many Nintendo based LPs as he had been because he doesn't want to risk receiving a copyright strike from Nintendo which could put his channel in jeopardy.<sup>32</sup>

Even though Scott has not completely stopped creating Nintendo LPs his numbers do show a dramatic decrease. Instead, Scott is creating more LPs of indie developed games such as Minecraft. This is an important market development because Minecraft has become the most popular LP title uploaded and viewed on YouTube.<sup>33</sup> As Sam Gutelle of Tubefilter explains the reason for its overwhelming success is that, "the game has encouraged players to share their

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<sup>29</sup> Zack Scott, "Facebook Status Post: January 29, 2015," Facebook.com. (29 Jan 2015).

<sup>30</sup> Zack Scott (2015).

<sup>31</sup> Zack Scott (2015).

<sup>32</sup> ZackScottGames, "Thoughts on Nintendo Let's Plays," YouTube.com, (17 May 2013).

<sup>33</sup> Sam Gutelle, "Minecraft Videos Have Totaled 47 Billion Views ot Date," TubeFilter.com. (21 Nov 2014).

results from the start. Instead of interfering with fans who are technically infringing on its copyright, the company has taken advantage of the free advertising those videos provide.”<sup>34</sup> Clearly for moderate ranking channels such as ZackScottGames it makes more sense to concentrate on creating content with companies that want their freely generated publicity. In instances such as these, rather than fight against the regulations of architecture and laws, players are letting the market control their output.



**MasaeAnela (Masae Anela)**<sup>35</sup> Estimated Yearly Earnings: \$1,300-20,400

Views: 10,436,308 Network: MakerGen<sup>36</sup> (Disney)

All of Anela’s 1033 LPs videos are based on Nintendo games. 849 videos were uploaded prior to the ContentID Crisis, 169 after the crisis but before the Creator Program was announced, and 15 since the Creators Program was launched. MasaeAnela offers an expansive collection of videos in which she gives exciting, engaging, and entertaining commentary that makes viewers want to run out and buy every game she plays. Even though she is creating transformative works that offer valuable free publicity to the Nintendo brand, Anela explains, in an interview with Chris Kohler, from Wired, that in the third year of her YouTube career one of her *Twilight Princess* videos got her first ContentID strike and YouTube gave the ad revenue from her video to Nintendo.<sup>37</sup> Since Nintendo claims the revenue rather than block the videos, Anela has not had to remove any of her videos, however when asked how much of her revenue has been diverted she states, “It is ‘difficult’ to know how much money has been lost, ‘but it’s a pretty decent chunk’.”<sup>38</sup> Another interesting point to be made regarding Anela’s stance is that, in the midst of the pressure that Nintendo is exerting on her content, she states, “the ContentID

<sup>34</sup> Guttelle, “Minecraft” (2014).

<sup>35</sup> MasaeAnela, “Channel Home Page,” YouTube.com, (April 2015).

<sup>36</sup> “YouTube Statistics for MasaeAnela,” Socialblade.com, (11 April 2015).

<sup>37</sup> Chris Kohler, “Why Does Nintendo Want the Superfan’s Money?,” (27 March 2015).

<sup>38</sup> Kohler.



thing only affects those who make revenue off of their videos... if you're just doing it as a hobby, it's really not going to affect you much."<sup>39</sup> Here we can see that creators who have loyally continued to make Nintendo LPs for the love of their games have had to completely sacrifice their potential ad revenue as they transition into hobbyists. Still, even this collection, of faithful Nintendo exclusive players are tapering off their quantity of videos. As we can see from this survey, though Anela has not publicly stated that she will stop making Nintendo based LPs, her number of uploads has decreased dramatically since the ContentID sweep and subsequent launching of the Nintendo Creators Program.



**Andrewg1990** (Andrew Gardikis)<sup>40</sup> Estimated Yearly Earnings: \$114-1,800

Views 4,456,869 Network: None<sup>41</sup>

All of Gardikis's 210 LPs are based on Nintendo games, 153 videos were uploaded prior to the ContentID Crisis, 43 after the crisis but before the Creators Program was announced, and 14 since the Creators Program was launched. Since 2007 Andrew Gardikis has held the world's record for the fastest time playing one of Nintendo's most popular titles, "Super Mario Brothers."<sup>42</sup> According to a recent interview with Billy Baker, of the Boston Globe, Gardikis, is trying to beat the game in the fastest time mathematically possible. It is these unique "speed-runs" that make up a bulk of his videos. Consequently, in this survey, Andrewg1990 stands alone on two accounts. First, it is the only channel that offers LPs with little to no voice overs, making these videos clearly more derivative than they are transformative. Second, this is the only channel that has had all of its Nintendo videos accepted into the Creators Program.

<sup>39</sup> Masae Anela, "Response," Ask.fm. (2014).

<sup>40</sup> Andrewg1990, "Channel Home Page," YouTube.com. (April 2015).

<sup>41</sup> "YouTube Statistics for Andrewg1990." Socialblade.com. (13 April 2015).

<sup>42</sup> Billy Baker, "Quincy Gamer Quest for Super Mario Perfection," BostonGlobe.com, (2 Mar 2014).

Consequently, Gardikis's unique ambassador status, as a world record holder, and his simple walkthrough videos makes him the perfect match for the program.

An extensive search through YouTube's content for channels that have had their videos accepted into the program, reveals that most of them contain very simple walkthroughs, without commentary.<sup>43</sup> Therefore, no significantly successful channels have been accepted into the Creators Program. Keeping this in mind it is easy to see that if Nintendo can only attract low ranking channels, which exclusively make Nintendo LPs, then they will inadvertently spend more money on maintaining the Creators Program than the ad revenue it will draw in. The bewildering notion that Nintendo may not only be alienating itself from a great source of free publicity, but also lose money from their Creators Program has caused many in this industry to ponder, what is the actual motive behind the program? Since, Nintendo is not going to make much money off of the low ranking channels that are interested in the program, some wonder if it is actually an elaborate scheme to gain control over their game's reviews. Consequently, one of the common worries that has surface among players and reviewers, across all channel sizes, is the fear that the Creators Program will allow Nintendo to filter out unfavorable LPs and reviews.<sup>44</sup> <sup>45</sup> While some may think this is an irrational fear there have already been instances when YouTube gaming critics have received copyright strikes on legitimate game reviews, by companies whose sole intention was to squash the negative press it was generating.<sup>46</sup> While this most likely is not Nintendo's intention, the fear that it may be is enough of a chilling effect to make the YouTube gaming community shy away from creating content with their products. As Lawrence Lessig points out in *Code Version 2.0*, "the interaction between commerce and

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<sup>43</sup> MarioPartyLegacy, "Channel Home Page," YouTube.com, (April 2015).

<sup>44</sup> Philip Defranco, "NINTENDO VS. YOUTUBERS!!," YouTube.com, (29 Jan 2015). In his video, "NINTENDO VS. YOUTUBERS!!," Philip Defranco, "Will Nintendo be heavy handed? If they don't like a review would they deny it?"

<sup>45</sup> GeekRemix, "Nintendo's New Partnership Program is HORRIBLE for Game Journalism," YouTube.com, (28 Jan 2015). GeekRemix argues that the program will "deprive the market of unbiased reviews."

<sup>46</sup> TotalBiscuit,(2013).

government will change the effective architecture of the internet, [and] that change will increase the regulability of behavior on the internet,”<sup>47</sup> and since this survey reveals there has been substantial decreases in quantity of Nintendo LPs uploaded by the representative channels as a consequence of YouTube and Nintendo’s collaborative regulatory changes, we can see the dawn of a revolution in which regulatory power is shifting into the hands of some of YouTube’s evolving work force, while it is being drawn away from others.

In retrospect this case study illustrates that what was once a loose collection of independent amateurs, has evolved into a three tier channel system. The top tier of MCN managed channels, have helped to financially empower creators such as Felix Kjellberg to the point that they can break away and create their own websites and gain control of their content. Meanwhile, for the middle tier of MCN affiliate channels, while they too exist under the auspices of major media companies, they have not grown large enough to break away from YouTube. Instead they are dealing with the confinement of YouTube and Nintendo’s policies by either concentrating on making LPs of user friendly titles, or becoming hobbyists without any desire to make a living off of their LP’s ad revenue. Even though both of these reactions in a sense neutralize the effects of Nintendo’s policies they do not push against the regulatory confinements created by YouTube to insulate themselves from being accused of copyright infringement. While the lowest tier of channels are not currently managed by MCNs, they fit best into the Nintendo Creators Program, which would fundamentally make them members of Nintendo’s MCN. For now Nintendo seems satisfied with being able to control the content of the lowest tier of LP channels. Perhaps Nintendo is speculating that as the top tier of channels break away from YouTube their channels will be able to climb up the ranks and become the PewDiePies of tomorrow. Either way, no matter which tier a Let’s Play channel resides, commerce, in the form

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<sup>47</sup> Lessig, (2006), p 81.

of financial gains through ad revenue, has become a driving force in how code regulates their content.

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