

## **“Keep in mind that I will be improving”: The Opening Post as a Request for Absolution**

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### **Abstract**

Creating, sharing, and critiquing user-generated content are increasingly common practices in online environments, as users become active producers, reviewers, and promoters, not just consumers, of content. This paper investigates the functions of the opening posts in an online discussion forum dedicated to user-generated game levels (i.e., mini-games) designed with the *LittleBigPlanet* digital game series. In the analyzed community, the first post of each thread plays a crucial role, as authors introduce themselves, present their work, and set the stage for discussion. Findings show that the opening post carries a variety of discursive functions: it serves as a creative presentation of content, a self-reflective disclosure of practices, and a passionate call to participation. Moreover, by artfully using these themes, participants construct the opening post as a “request for absolution.” Through an ethnographic discourse analysis approach that draws on politeness theory, this study furthers the understanding of how users discursively construct and seek to increase opportunities for interaction, peer feedback, and social learning in a creative online space.

**Keywords:** Discussion forums; thread openers; affinity spaces; gaming communities; discourse analysis in computer-mediated communication; LittleBigPlanet

## Introduction

This study builds on communication studies that focus on dialogical (Bakhtin, 1981; Baxter, 2011) and negotiated (Manning, 2014) meaning-making processes, rather than social-psychological approaches. It looks into the construction and negotiation of meanings through talk-in-action in a social context assuming that talk is not only *informing*, but also *performing*, as it executes a number of discursive actions that have consequences and implications beyond the transmission of information (Potter, 1997; Potter, Edwards, & Wetherell, 1993). This approach does not look at talk as an expression of what people “really” think, but rather at structures and functions of talk “performing various kinds of discursive actions” (Lamerichs & te Molder, 2003, p. 452). This study also draws on politeness theory considering discourse as a relational work enacted in a social space to avoid threats to face and self-esteem (Brown & Levinson, 1987).

In online discussion forums, the opening post of a thread plays an important role, as users start a new conversation and seek to elicit responses. Research shows that the rhetorical features of a post can influence the likelihood of receiving responses from other users (Joyce & Kraut, 2006; Lampe & Johnston, 2005). Posts with plain language that feature autobiographical elements and that are focused on content relevant to the discussion and the audience are more likely to receive replies (Arguello et al., 2006; Burke, Joyce, Kim, Anand, & Kraut, 2007). In other words, linguistic clarity, self-disclosure, and topical coherence can impact the success of online communication. The rhetorical strategies of self-disclosing introductions and requests can influence the likelihood of reply (Burke et al., 2007). Disclosure signals willingness of vulnerability and openness to develop a relationship based on reciprocal trust (McKenna, Green, & Gleason, 2002). Self-disclosure can be expressed through self-deprecating presentations that are used to lower audience expectations, alleviate pressure of performance, preserve self-esteem, and, more broadly, as an excuse for possible failure (Brandt, Vonk, & van Knippenberg, 2009; Ducsay, 2009; Lewis & Neighbors, 2005; Midgley, Arunkumar, & Urdan, 1996). This form of “sandbagging” (Gibson & Sachau, 2000) can also be interpreted as a way to alleviate the consequences of public commitment in a social space (Schlenker, Dlugolecki, & Doherty, 1994). By expressing understatements and “begging forgiveness,” participants of a social group try to avoid threats to face and self-esteem (Brown & Levinson, 1987) that may arise from publicly disclosed opinions and feedback.

In this context, the presentation of the self can play an important role. Selective forms of public self-presentation are common in computer-mediated settings such as dating and social networking websites (Gonzales & Hancock, 2008; Manning, 2014; Toma & Hancock, 2010). In particular, the asynchronous character of discussion forums allows users to freely edit and update their profiles to offer socially desirable representations of their selves and avoid undesirable cues of communication that cannot be controlled in face-to-face settings (Walther, 2007). Research has abundantly explored the presentation of the self and the construction of identity/identities in online spaces (Gonzales & Hancock, 2008; McKenna & Bargh, 1998; Turkle, 1995), however, personal expression and communication cannot be confined to self-representations, as people often express themselves by creating and sharing artifacts. Hence, more research on the presentation of user-generated content is needed. This study poses the question *if* and *how* such representational work is put forth in the opening posts of an online space, in which participants present their creations and try to elicit peer feedback. In this environment, the discourse is, to a considerable extent, *artifact-oriented*, rather than *self-oriented*, and the rhetoric work of persuasion is not directed at capturing interest in the self/participant, but rather in the artifact/object generated by the participant's activity and creativity.

## **Methods**

### **Ethnographic Discourse Analysis in Computer-Mediated Communication**

Written discourse mediates many aspects of social life in our contemporary world (Atkinson & Coffey, 1997; Peräkylä, 2005). Discourse can be considered both a linguistic/semiotic and a social/constructive phenomenon through which people achieve shared and consensually produced understandings (Gee, 2010; Kress, 2011). If it is true that “we make or build things in the world through language” (Gee, 2010, p. 17), discourse analysis offers “a framework for the deconstruction of meanings” (Burck, 2005, p. 249) that helps us better understand the world. A discourse analysis approach entails the study of situated language-in-use in a social context (Gee, 2010). Discourse analysis in computer-mediated communication (CMC) looks at social interactions enacted through the use of information and communication technologies (Gao, Zhang, & Franklin, 2013; Mazur, 2004), and, in particular, at online social spaces such as discussion forums, blogs, and chats.

An ethnographic approach to computer-mediated discourse analysis entails a thick analysis and description of a situated culture and its discursive practices (Androutsopoulos, 2008; Garcia, Standlee, Bechkoff, & Cui, 2009; Geertz, 1983; Macgilchrist & Van Hout, 2011; Smart, 2012). This approach is participant-centered as “it begins from the perspective of the participant rather than that of the researcher” (Lamerichs & te Molder, 2003, p. 459), avoiding researcher’s “rudimentary” (Lamerichs & te Molder, 2003, p. 469) categories of analysis that may hinder unanticipated discursive actions enacted by the participants.

### **Data Selection, Collection, and Analysis**

*LittleBigPlanet* is a popular series of digital games that includes several titles. The prominent feature of this series is the possibility to create user-generated game levels, thanks to a wide range of integrated creative and social tools. In fact, the titles in the *LittleBigPlanet* series can be considered “play, create, and share” hybrids that include advanced, yet easy to use, game design tools that promise professional results. As of July 2014, approximately nine million game levels have been created and shared with the series (<http://lbp.me>).

The corpus of this study is made up of 826 posts (54 threads) published in a discussion forum dedicated to the *LittleBigPlanet* series. The sample was defined by time and activity (one continuous month of online interactions in 2008, and one in 2012), rather than content, in order to avoid researcher-selected cases. Further, the guiding parameters for the identification of the size of the sample were a tentative judgment of adequacy (enough data to address the research questions) and feasibility (enough time to analyze data), as well as choices made by other researchers in analogous studies (Gee, 2010; Wood & Kroger, 2000). It is important to note that in discourse analysis “the units of analysis are texts or parts of texts rather than participants” (Wood & Kroger, 2000, p. 78) and “the sample is not well defined until after the analysis is done” (p. 79). In other words, the researcher doing discourse analysis needs to focus on the discourse, rather than on the size of the sample (or the number of participants), which is determined by considerations on whether there are sufficient data to put forward and justify interesting arguments related to the guiding research questions and the purpose of the study (Wood & Kroger, 2000, p. 81). Moreover, a larger sample does not necessarily imply a “better” study, as “close line-by-line data analyses can be rigorous even when using just several lines of transcription” (S. J. Tracy, 2010, p. 841). From an ethnographic standpoint, I spent almost three years exploring the titles of the *LittleBigPlanet* series and observing the

interactions in the analyzed community. Data excerpts quoted in this paper are sequentially numbered in braces (e.g., {01}) and labeled as:

{sequential number of the excerpt} [(unique number assigned to the thread)-year-month-day of the post-(position of the post in the thread/total number of posts in the thread)-nickname of the user].

Shorter quotes are presented in double quotations marks in parentheses. All quotes are cited verbatim, without corrections, as they appear in the original text. Users' nicknames have been replaced with researcher-generated aliases.

### Findings

In the analyzed community, the authors of user-generated game-levels (i.e., mini-games) use opening posts to present their creations, invite users to play them, and ask for peer feedback in order to improve their current and future work.

The analysis reveals that the opening post carries different and complementary discursive functions: (1) a *creative presentation of content*, (2) a *self-reflective disclosure of practices*, and (3) a *passionate call to participation*. These three functions represent respectively (1) *artifact-oriented*, (2) *creator-oriented*, and (3) *player-oriented* dimensions, each structured into three discursive themes: (1) *game features*, *gameplay*, and *comparison*; (2) *effort*, *self-appreciation*, and *experience*; (3) *invitation to play*, *invitation to comment*, and *request for absolution*. This thematic structure is illustrated, with examples, in Table 1.

Table 1. The opening post: functions, dimensions, and themes.

Function	Dimension	Theme	Example
Creative presentation of content	Artifact-oriented	Game features	“It’s very challenging”
		Gameplay	“Step into the lift and you will be lowered into the tank”

		Comparison	“Higher quality than the first level I created”
Self-reflective disclosure of practices	Creator-oriented	Effort	“That was a bit challenging to accomplish”
		Self-appreciation	“I’m a little proud of it”
		Experience	“This was my first level”
Passionate call to participation	Player-oriented	Invitation to play	“Check ‘em out”
		Invitation to comment	“Let me know what you think!”
		Request for absolution	“Keep in mind that I will be improving”

In the following sections, findings related to each of the aforementioned themes and their discursive functions are presented and discussed in greater detail.

### Artifact-Oriented Themes

**Game features.** The description of the features of game levels appears in most of the analyzed threads in which users present their creations. The description of the game levels is usually achieved through adjectives that describe features (“detailed”), atmosphere (“disturbingly cute but grim at the same time”), length (“short”), or difficulty (“this level is designed to provide a very difficult challenge to expert players”). Usually such descriptions feature at least the title of the game level and a brief comment about it.

Assigning a title to a game level is an activity far more complex than it may appear. In the analyzed community, it is not just a *naming* undertaking, but also a way to make a game level *findable* and *intriguing*. Given the growing number of game levels shared in the community, it may not be easy to find a level titled “Cars,” as the search engine would come up with thousands of results. In fact, some users complain about titles that are too vague and,

therefore, difficult to be found. In the following example users react to a game level presented with the title “Spider Cave” (see {18}):

{01} [(04)-2008-10-27-(02/16)-CPark]

You might want to give us your PSN as well, as just “Spider Cave” is a little difficult to narrow down with searching. I’m sure there’s plenty of “Spider Cave” levels.

{02} [(04)-2008-10-27-(03/16)-LonelliGun]

A little bit more details on the level please.:)

The user called CPark ({01}) requests the “PSN” of the author (i.e., the username on the PlayStation Network) in order to narrow down the search, which is reinforced by the subsequent comment ({02}) in which LonelliGun asks for “A little bit more details.” This example shows that the name of a user-generated game level has to reflect not only the taste and aesthetic choices of the creator, but also the technologic requirements dictated by the affordances of the available search engine, in order to allow other players to find it, play it, and critique it. Further, a captivating title has the potential to attract more players. For example, a user comments on a game level titled “Lights Out!” referencing its title ({03}):

{03} [(03)-2008-10-27-(12/20)-Softjets]

I’ll play it! shoulds rad by title alone.

In this post the user says that she will play the game level because the title is intriguing (“rad” is an abbreviation of “radical,” which means “cool” or “awesome”), not other features of the game. This confirms that the naming process is an important discursive endeavor enacted to satisfy issues of *visibility* (be findable) and *appeal* (be intriguing) in order to attract new players who can provide valuable feedback.

**Gameplay.** Authors often complement descriptions of game features with explanations of gameplay (i.e., the story and how the game should be played, with its environment, goals, and rules). A good example of a gameplay description is provided in the following excerpt ({04}):

{04} [(06)-2008-10-29-(01/16)-Mageda]

You're trapped in a dark cave Try to find a way out using the lights.

In one brief sentence the creator of the game level describes its plot, environment, and setup (“You're trapped in a dark cave”) and what the player is supposed to do in order to beat the game (“Try to find a way out using the lights”). Like in this example, most of the descriptions of gameplay in the analyzed community are rather brief, which reflects the nature of digital games literacy (you learn to beat them by playing them, not by reading manuals), but some of the creators offer precise instructions ({05}):

{05} [(26)-2008-11-13-(01/15)-Blinko]

Groovy wheel of color

Title: Groovy wheel of color

PSN: Blinko

[Link to YouTube Video]

Description:

Fun colorful level where you travel the Grand Canyon in a groovy mobile.

Some simple platforming and balancing gameplay.

Tips:

Dont go tooo fast or you will miss the designated stops.

Dont jump out of the groovy mobile unless safe!

Have fun :)

In this example, in order to illustrate the gameplay of her game, the author uses a “transmodal” strategy, complementing the written description with a link to a YouTube video, which is a common practice in the community. The description is vivid (“color,” “Fun,” “colorful”) and transmits a sense of action and motion (“Groovy,” “wheel,” “travel,” “mobile,” “jump”), further expressed through the repeated letter “o” in the utterance “too fast.” By presenting practical suggestions (“Tips”) the creator tries to make her game level enjoyable and prevent players from giving up after their first attempt. Let's consider another example:

{06} [(36)-2008-11-20-(01/19)-IcyLight]



Hey there... This is my first post (of oh, so many, probably and hopefully) so hey there, nice to meet you :).

My Playstation Network is: IcyLight.

Level Name: Frozen Murder

... Tips: Do not trust ice. Be wary and ready at all times

All constructive criticism i appreciate dearly, either leave comments on the level, or post here, send me a message on ps3, either way, as long as i can learn and improve.

In this post ({06}), the discursive function of the “tips” is more oriented to attracting players by instilling interest and curiosity through catchy hints (“Do not trust ice”), rather than explicit directions. The ending sentence (“as long as i can learn and improve”) shows that presenting a game level to the community, with its feature and gameplay, is an important part of the creative and learning process, as authors strive to earn players, thus increasing opportunities to receive valuable peer feedback.

**Comparison.** Another discursive technique used in the community to stimulate interest and curiosity on game levels is *comparison*. Let’s consider a few examples:

{07} [(10)-2008-11-03-(01/19)-Maj1211]

Clock Town Theme - LoZ MM

I made a musical level based on the Clock Town theme in Legend of Zelda. It took me several hours to complete, so I hope you guys enjoy it, and I hope they don’t force me to take it down. Grr

For those that don’t know what I’m talking about, here’s the song:

[Link to YouTube Video]

{08} [(05)-2008-10-29-(01/15)-Doo533]

mini tutorial creation technique - The Elevator

When I saw the other tutorial video by that guy who did the fake item’s, I subscribed to his youtube feed. He’s posted this great video of a working Elevator. Top quality in my opinion, [Link to YouTube Video]

{09} [(01)-2008-10-25-(01/11)-Meadow1]

### Urban Pipe-Dream

This isn't quite the Azure Palace, but this is my first level! It took about 8 hours to put together and takes up half the thermometer. Feel free to post comments.

[[Link to YouTube Video](#)]

Comparing a user-generated game level to other digital games or cultural references creates a visual and conceptual link that helps to situate it in a broader context (07) “I made a musical level based on the Clock Town theme in Legend of Zelda”) or in the situated frame of the participatory space (08) “the other tutorial video by that guy”), suggesting what kind of expectations the player should have about it (09) “This isn't quite the Azure Palace”).

Comparison can also be a preventive and defensive strategy. In fact, by comparing the features of a game to other references, creators reveal their primary sources of inspiration, thus avoiding possible critiques of “plagiarism” or “copying.” It is also a way to communicate their passion for specific titles, creating “tributes” that reinterpret them through the affordances and style of *LittleBigPlanet*.

After considering artifact-oriented themes of the opening posts, the following section explores creator-oriented themes: effort, self-appreciation, and experience.

### Creator-Oriented Themes

**Effort.** Participants often draw attention to their effort as creators, players, and contributors. For example, creators emphasize the amount of time it took them to complete their game levels (“60+ hours of work”) or point at their uninterrupted (“which I have been working on practically none stop for the last two days”) and continuing (“i have put about 40+ hours into it so far”) work. Authors employ diverse discursive techniques to express their commitment and effort: they use capital letters to stress words denoting the amount of effort (“I've spent ALOT of time testing this”), reinforcing repetitions (“hours upon hours”), or superlatives (“to the greatest of my ability”). Interestingly, data show that some participants mention big numbers to highlight their effort (e.g., “Hope you all enjoy what took me 4 months to create”), while others (11) minimize such numbers to underline that their advanced skills allow them to create compelling game levels in a short amount of time, which positions them as experts within the community:

{10} [(06)-2008-10-29-(15/16)-LonelliGun]

:pHow long did it take for you to do them.:p

{11} [(06)-2008-10-29-(16/16)-Mageda]

It took me eight hours to do ‘Mystic Forrest Adventures’ (also because this was my first creation), and I guess about five or six hours to do ‘Saved by the Light’.. :)

In this example ({11}), the creator of two game levels is answering to a user who asked about the time necessary to design them ({10}). The creator answers minimizing the time and effort required to complete them. She accomplishes this in different and concurrent ways. First, she says that it took eight hours to complete “Mystic Forrest Adventures” because it was her first creation, thus justifying the amount of time with inexperience. Second, she employs hedging in her answer (“I guess,” “about,” “five or six hours”) to signal that she was not paying attention to the amount of time necessary to complete the game level, while other players provide specific numbers, which suggests that they are concerned about “quantifying effort.” Third, the creator ends her post with a “smiley” emoticon, which, in this case, demonstrates self-satisfaction for a significant result accomplished in a relatively small amount of time. Let’s consider another example:

{12} [(15)-2008-11-04-(09/17)- NBJ]

There are certain levels where you know within the first 30 seconds that you are in for something special and this is one of those levels. It is the kind of level where you sense that the creator really cared about what they were making and put a lot of effort into it.

{13} [(15)-2008-11-04-(17/17)-Ome8]

Great level, well lit, awesome atmosphere and I enjoyed the various challenges, especially the final one. You’ve put a lot of time and effort into the level and it shows.

These excerpts ({12} and {13}) illustrate that effort is a valued component in the community. In fact, by discursively negotiating effort users construct a shared understanding of what is

rewarded and appreciated in the community, thus influencing the way users present and critique their creations:

{14} [(52)-2012-11-24-(05/19)-Jigsaw1]

Great job on this!! I was really intrigued by all the detail and thought you put into this level!!!

This comment ({14}) is interesting because it shows that participants not only appreciate the *results* of effort (“detail”), but also *effort* itself (“thought”).

In conclusion, the analysis shows that by emphasizing or minimizing effort, creators pursue at least three important goals through different discursive techniques. First, by emphasizing effort creators reinforce their invitation to play, inferring that the game level is worth playing, since a lot of effort has been put into it. Second, by minimizing effort creators construct an identity of mastery and position themselves as experts within the participatory space. Third, by valuing effort, participants socially construct and negotiate its understanding, thus making an impact on how game levels are created, presented, and discussed in the community.

**Self-appreciation.** Participants express their appreciation for their own work in many ways. For example, they talk about a feeling of pride (“My first level ... I’m a little proud of it”), they use extreme case formulations (“It may not be the most visually aesthetic map in the world, but everything works properly”), or they consider the work accomplished as a payoff for their effort (“I have to say, the part I’m most proud of is the part where I got the background layer spinning”). In fact, self-appreciation seems often to be discursively enacted as *the other side of effort*. In some cases creators project their self-appreciation to a later time, envisioning the grand results of their current efforts in present or future game levels (“It will be epic” or “I ... started a newer grander project”). This *projected appreciation* functions as a goal-orienting and self-encouraging device that motivates learning and spurs creativity.

**Experience.** By expressing experience and inexperience participants achieve a variety of discursive goals: they position themselves as novices; they anticipate possible flaws in their projects; they try to elicit sympathizing responses through self-deprecating statements; and they express sheer urge for participation (e.g., by sharing works in progress). This tendency

is confirmed by statements of inexperience followed by remarks of self-appreciation, like in the following excerpt ({15}):

{15} [(04)-2008-10-27-(01/16)-Softjets]

-My first level (which i'm showing off on my first post, Hi everybody). I'm a little proud of it, although i do realize it has many flaws.

On the other hand, positioning oneself (or another user) as an expert brings into account a status of mastery within the community. For example, in the following excerpt a creator writes about her own game level:

{16} [(22)-2008-11-11-(01/12)-Bartha]

this level is designed to provide a very difficult challenge to expert players. I wanted something that \*I\* would find challenging.... if I dont enjoy playing my own creation, what's the point?

Through this construction the creator is not only informing the community that the game level is challenging, even for experienced players, but also that the skills of the creator as a player allow her to set the bar even higher. The two asterisks surrounding the “I” (“that \*I\* would find challenging”) further emphasize this statement. In conclusion, the analysis shows that users negotiate experience and inexperience in different ways in order to build situated identities as experts or novices and achieve a variety of situated discursive goals.

After considering artifact-oriented and creator-oriented themes of the opening posts, the following section explores player-oriented themes: invitation to play, invitation to comment, and request for absolution.

### **Player-Oriented Themes**

**Invitation to play.** One of the principal objectives of the analyzed discussion forum is to present user-generated game levels and invite participants to play them. What is not always evident is how creators discursively enact such invitations in the opening posts. Of course, the act of presenting a game level is *per se* an invitation to play it and there are numerous explicit calls to play in the opening posts (e.g., “so check ‘em out;” “if anyone would give it a try”). However, some of the most interesting exhortations are implicitly achieved through

different “luring” discursive techniques, such as *rewarding* players (“Just for playing the level you win a neat scrolling arrow sign with animated LED lights that I made” or “the tank’s 1st build in a prize bubble at the end of the stage”) and *challenging* them (“see if you can beat my time” or “Defeat the boss, if you can ... I’ll be impressed”).

**Invitation to comment.** The act of publishing a post that presents a user-generated game level is in itself an undeclared invitation to comment. However, many participants ask for comments in a direct way (“Feel free to post comments” or “let me know what you think!”). Interestingly, some of the feedback requests are very detailed, which denotes engagement and care for the artifacts and the creative process (“if anyone finds any bugs or glitches or problems with it, definitely let me know; that’d be a big help” or “If you come across any more glitches, please let me know”).

**Request for absolution.** One of the most interesting findings of the study is related to a specific and pervasive discursive function of the opening posts, defined here as “request for absolution,” which is an invocation to kindness directed to commenters in the discussion forum. Through this technique, directed to potential players and commenters, authors try to avoid harsh criticism and save face. Sometimes this technique is very subtle. For example, a creator can put a specification of “Ver. 1.0” in the title of a game level shared in the community, to suggest that it is the very first version of the game level, which implies that there may be “bugs” and other imperfections. An interesting “request for absolution” is presented in the following excerpt ({17}):

{17} [(22)-2008-11-11-(01/12)-Bartha]

As it is, I give no apologies for the difficulty level of this one. This is sorta like Megaman 9; it’s really freaking hard, but entirely fair, nonetheless.

The sentence “I give no apologies for the difficulty level of this one” can be considered a mixture of the rhetorical figures of *antiphrasis* (a word or sentence used to mean the opposite of its sense) and *paralipsis* (stating something while pretending to pass it over). In other words, the creator, by saying “I give no apologies,” *is* actually giving apologies. In the second part of the excerpt the contrast between difficulty and enjoyment resonates in the opposition “really freaking hard, but entirely fair.” Additionally, the statement is cushioned by several

hedging adverbs, adverbial phrases, and specifications (“As it is,” “of this one,” “sorta,” “entirely,” and “nonetheless”).

The “request for absolution” seems to work like a ubiquitous magnet, attracting and re-contextualizing the functions of the themes presented in previous sections (game features, gameplay, comparison, effort, self-appreciation, experience, invitation to play, and invitation to comment). In fact, in the analyzed community, the request for absolution is achieved through different discursive techniques, each building on one of the aforementioned themes, as illustrated in Table 2.

Table 2. The opening post as a request for absolution.

Function	Dimension	Theme	Example
Creative presentation of content	Artifact-oriented	Game features	“it’s kind of short and simple”
		Gameplay	“Known Bugs/Glitches”
		Comparison	“This isn’t quite the Azure Palace”
Self-reflective disclosure of practices	Creator-oriented	Effort	“Hope you all enjoy what took me 4 months to create”
		Self-appreciation	“a level Im happy with”
		Experience	“but this is my first level!”
Passionate call to participation	Player-oriented	Invitation to play	“If you guys have some free time to look it up that would be cool”
		Invitation to comment	“let me know what you think! :D”
		Request for absolution	(All of the above)

Saying that a game level is short and simple, that it has bugs and glitches, and that it isn't as good as other creations shared in the community, are all ways of lowering audience expectations and requesting "absolution." Other ways to accomplish this discursive function are expressing effort, self-appreciation, and (in)experience. Further, even the way in which creators invite users to play and comment on their game levels can be at times interpreted as a request for absolution. Let's consider the following excerpt ({18}), which exemplifies the use of several discursive themes as a "request for absolution":

{18} [(04)-2008-10-27-(01/16)-Softjets]

Spider Cave

Softjets Master archive of current creative products

-My first level (which i'm showing off on my first post, Hi everybody). I'm a little proud of it, although i do realize it has many flaws. If you guys have some free time to look it up that would be cool, it's short and sweet. You won't regret it. It's titled spider cave exactly

This excerpt ({18}) presents several themes discussed in previous sections: game features ("it's short and sweet" and "It's titled spider cave exactly"), elements that can impact the gameplay ("i do realize it has many flaws"), self-appreciation ("I'm a little proud of it"), experience ("My first level"), invitation to play ("If you guys have some free time to look it up" and "You won't regret it"). In this example, all these themes also function as a request for absolution. Game features: the creator presents a possible flaw of the game (its shortness) by using the conventional construction "short and sweet," which normalizes the statement. Further, by using the adverb "exactly," the user implies that she is aware of the search engine issues discussed in a previous section. Gameplay: not only does the author state that the game level "has many flaws," but she also says "i do realize," thus showing awareness and anticipating possible critiques. Self-appreciation: by saying "I'm a little proud of it," the user tries to soften negative comments, since it is generally harder to give negative feedback to someone expressing pride for what she did. Experience: by saying that it is her "first level," the creator wants to make explicit her inexperience, in order to avoid harsh criticism. In this context, expectations of performance can be influenced by the level of skills and experience of the creator. Invitation to play: the sentence "If you guys have some free time to look it up that would be cool" is very interesting. The analytical technique of subtraction showed that



this sentence could have been much shorter, without losing its original meaning: “If you have time look it up” or, simply, “look it up.” Instead, the author starts the sentence with a conditional statement (“If”) and colloquially addresses the audience (“guys”). Further, she does not just say “time,” but “free time,” additionally softened by “some” (“some free time”). The sentence is concluded with a conditional verb (“that would be cool”), which further soothes the invitation to play, attempting to prevent harsh feedback.

### **Discussion and Conclusions**

In the investigated online space, the opening post performs specific discursive functions: it is a creative presentation of content, a self-reflective disclosure of practices, and a passionate call to participation. These three dimensions are respectively expressed by artifact-oriented, creator-oriented, and player-oriented discursive actions that reflect specific themes: game features, gameplay, comparison, effort, self-appreciation, experience, invitation to play, invitation to comment, and request for absolution. Considering these themes, an archetypal construction (i.e., an exemplary representation) of the opening post would have the following structure:

These are the characteristics of my game level (*game features*) and this is how you play it (*gameplay*). It is similar/different if compared to this other level/game (*comparison*). I spent a lot of time making it (*effort*) and I am somehow proud of it (*self-appreciation*), however, this is the first/second/third level that I have ever created (*experience*), so, please, go on and play it (*invitation to play*) as your feedback is very appreciated (*invitation to comment*) but do not be too harsh in your critiques (*request for absolution*).

Each of these themes carries a strategic function in the analyzed threads, as participants discursively construct a community geared toward participation, social learning, and creativity. Presenting game features and gameplay elements, comparing user-generated game levels to internal and external references, are basic building blocks of the creative discourse. In these endeavors users need to consider issues of visibility and appeal, in order to attract more players.

Effort, self-appreciation, and experience play a less direct, but equally important, role. By expressing, recognizing, and valuing effort participants create a space in which hard work is rewarded and appreciated. By discussing it, authors enact specific discursive functions, such as inviting other users to play their creations (a lot of work has been put into them). Effort is counterbalanced by statements of self-appreciation expressed to acknowledge the results of hard work and set motivational milestones for future achievements. Self-appreciation (not to be confused with “bragging”) stands as a heartfelt expression of motivation and commitment in a public space. Participants negotiate experience and inexperience to position themselves in the community as novices or experts (it was hard or easy to create a well-designed game level).

Inviting users to play and comment on user-generated game levels are the primary goals of the participants in the analyzed community. Finally, participants seem to “walk on eggshells” when they present their creations, in order to avoid unpleasant public feedback that could harm their self-esteem or their social persona. They use hedging and politeness communicative strategies, not only to avoid threats to their face (Brown & Levinson, 1987) and build their insider’s persona as knowledgeable participants (Gee, 2012), but also to achieve situated discursive goals, such as setting audience expectations, inviting users to play their creations, and requesting peer feedback. This request for absolution builds on each of the themes discussed in this studies (see Tables 1 and 2) and plays a pivotal role in the social construction of learning and creativity.

### **Limitations of the Study and Directions for Future Research**

This study is limited by the fact that participants’ demographics, such as age, gender, or nationality, are not disclosed. Future studies would benefit from knowing such variables, to better understand how different populations use situated discursive functions to achieve specific goals. Another limitation of the study is that it does not consider opening posts that did not receive a reply. Future studies could investigate the effectiveness of the discursive techniques examined in this paper by analyzing the correlation between the strategies used in the opening posts and their success in the threads.

In conclusion, the discursive functions and themes presented in this study are by no means exhaustive. Future studies could build on and add to the proposed categories, expanding how



participant construct opening posts and enact “requests for absolution” in other creative online spaces.

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