Since the dawn of time, humans have been tool-using beasts. We banged together rocks to form a cutting edge (and incidentally discovered fire), and with that cutting edge formed a weapon, which in turn was used to finally teach that saber-toothed cat a pointed lesson in humility. (And since raw saber-toothed cat is a rare delicacy - that is, too expensive for most people, and better used as a garnish than a main course - fire finally came in handy.) Over the morning of time, we banged together other materials to create the wheel, the printing press, the indoor privy; and around the noon of time, the hybrid car. All of these tools garnered effusive praise, with terms like efficiency, accessibility, and wow! that saber-toothed cat is delicious! being bandied about. And while those are all very well and good, an early afternoon of time tool requests - nay, demands - a new word to describe it: adorable.

When Media Molecule first formed as a game company, and the founders were sitting around discussing the design of their flagship game, they were in a bind: how could they design a triple-A game with little money and fewer employees, without mortgaging their houses, maxing out their credit cards, and riding bikes to work after their cars were repossessed? The first stroke of brilliance emerged when one called out, “Player-created content!” and the second soon followed: “We’ll make it so adorable that players will just have to build their own levels! They won’t be able to help themselves!” After a moment of awed silence, a third pitched in: “And explosions. Lots of explosions.”

“Cute explosions, though.”

“Right, right, cute explosions.”

And thus was *Little Big Planet* for the PlayStation 3 born, followed quickly (and adorably, like little baby chicks) by a PlayStation Portable expansion by the same name, a sequel titled *Little Big Planet 2*, a PlayStation Vita expansion, *Little Big Planet Karting*, and numerous...
downloadable content packs ranging from Muppets to *Metal Gear Solid*.

Figure 2: *Metal Gear Solid 4’s* Old Snake becomes *Little Big Planet’s* Old Sack Snake (*Williams, 2011*). Image credits: MugenShinobido ([http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=H7GQsIg679Q](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=H7GQsIg679Q)) and Media Molecule, respectively.

And while Media Molecule was busily increasing their loveable empire, mere players became godlike creators, adding over 8 million levels for others to play. Some of these levels were absurdly cute:

Figure 3: An absurdly adorable level. Built by dajdaj03; image credit goes to shadowriver ([https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=2edKAmqiQos](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=2edKAmqiQos)).

Some of them were homages:
Some of them were only incredibly impressive:

[embedded calculator video from LBP beta: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ZiRgYBHaoU]

Figure 5: The complex logic behind building a calculator in LBP Beta.

Some were designed to teach classroom content:

Figure 6: Look Ma! I learned fractions! Image credits: my upcoming dissertation fractions game.

Some were designed to help fellow designers design, and shared in level or video form:
And still others were designed to be the type of experience that Media Molecule wanted most strongly to share: cute explosions.

But all of them were made using the same tool: *Little Big Planet*.

“Okay,” I hear you say, “that’s all very well and good, but how is a game a tool?” (And you’ll have to pardon me for hearing you say that in Stephen Fry’s voice. After spending so much time with him as the *Little Big Planet* narrator, I’ve discovered that nearly everything is better with his voice - and when it’s not better with Stephen Fry, it’s better with Morgan Freeman. But I digress.)

A game is a tool when that game is required to build a certain type of thing. Much as a particular wrench is needed to tighten bolts on that hybrid car, *Little Big Planet* is needed to build and share these special adorable levels and logic puzzles.

“That’s a bit of a circular definition,” you crankily say in Stephen Fry’s voice, “since you need the tool to build the things that wouldn’t exist without the tool in the first place.”

Yeah, well, the word you/Stephen Fry are looking for is proprietary. My broken Honda can’t be fixed without a proprietary tool to fix the proprietary things that the proprietary tool was built to fix in the first place. And in this rare case, my proprietary tool lets me build my own proprietary
things, that it was proprietarily designed to build in the first place.

(I hereby trademark that last sentence.)

And as I play this proprietary game I collect even more proprietary tools - with every hidden corner explored, every boss dragon disabled, every evil sackbot tricked into running off a cliff, my toolbox expands. Now I can adjust gravity, shoot cakes at nemeses with my cakeinator, skip through a black hole into worlds unknown, build an animated octopus that roars at my pirate ship and throws exploding fish, develop complex logic that makes this happen when I do that (but only if the other thing hasn't happened yet), and compose my own creepy music which makes it seem as if reavers are always just out of sight.

But the best part - better than black holes, better than Stephen Fry, better than reavers (or rather, better than lack of reavers, which is way better than the actual presence of reavers) - is that we are coasting gently into a lazy afternoon of creating together, sharing together, making the world better together. Little Big Planet is just one early afternoon of time tool that brings people together for a common purpose. Foldit is also one - that brings people together FOR SCIENCE! DigitalGlobe shares another in times of crisis, such as when planes go missing or natural disasters strike. And of course Wikipedia, where folks all over the world crowd-source information to make it easy to find out what other videogames Stephen Fry has voiced (and how many clicks does it take you to wikiwander from the horse collar to Little Big Planet?). Thanks to Wikipedia, facts that used to be the realm of the advantaged intellectual are shared willy-nilly with no respect for social class, accomplishing that most important goal of any agreeable society: helping people get ideas above their station.

In other words, this early afternoon of time is the best of times, the worst of times, the most meandering of times - as we start descending into the sunset time, tools for telling our stories become links in other people’s lives. Natural links that are stumbled upon unexpectedly, instead of mandatory links that are forced upon us (like every eighth grader in the country reading Moby Dick, snickering about the title, being blocked from every relevant site through their school internet, and filling in little bubbles on a piece of paper that sorts them into tidy categories¹). Some links are created intentionally to help shape the world, like Foldit, DigitalGlobe, and Wikipedia - some are created to help others shape the world through both sharing experiences and tools to build more experiences, like Little Big Planet. Still more are designed to share the experiences of building experiences through hosting the stories of people changing the world one designed experience at a time, with examples ranging from designing interactive documentaries about mental illnesses to augmented reality games about Odysseus (no snickering from students here - or, frankly, probably just a lot fewer). And other links are just left lying around, un-planned and un-designed: I went from John Scalzi’s blog post about requesting conventions to have harassment policies to getting two free e-books from my new favorite sci-fi series (can you retrace my steps?).

¹ And how does a piece of paper know how smart an eighth grader is? It's a piece of paper. It's never been an eighth grader, unless it's from one of the really unsafe factories.
These links will only continue to expand - ahead of us lies an unseeable, unknowable future. That future is exciting, but also terrifying (especially since it’s the sunset of time, which sounds as if we should start busting out the kerosene lamps and hoarding canned goods). I deeply believe in what Martin Luther King said: “The arc of the moral universe is long, but it bends towards justice.” But I also deeply believe that the moral arc of the universe bends towards justice, but it will not happen on its own. There are a million zillion billion ways, at least, that we can pull that arc towards justice - one of them is by telling our stories and sharing our experiences. And merely one of the ways to do that is through Little Big Planet, this adorable and quirky and playful early afternoon of time tool. Just as we watch Neil deGrasse Tyson’s Cosmos together and learn about the science of our world, we must build and share our stories to learn about the invisible pieces of our world, like justice and friendship and truth and the many faces of beauty.

Let’s go into this evening together, sharing experiences, telling jokes, and singing. Let’s keep creating, and look forward to a new dawn. Let’s make and share and play our dreams (and nightmares) together, push Little Big Planet even closer to 9 million player-created levels, move through our day towards the sunset, and pull at the arc of justice. Media Molecule’s gamble really paid off: banging rocks together has never been this real.

Many thanks to Dennis Ramirez and Theresa Elsey Skov for their feedback on earlier versions of this paper.

Additional Resources


2 Although I do know one thing about the future: my lunch will likely include a cheese sandwich, and maybe extra pickles on the side, with some of those extra-crispy fries and a puddle of that particularly piquant homemade ketchup that embarrasses all other ketchups by merely standing around and being.