So you want to be a video game designer.

You're clever. You can entertain millions of people for billions of hours. Here's how you prove it: Find a PlayStation 3, buy LittleBigPlanet and make a luscious new level with the game's prodigious editing tools.

LittleBigPlanet is the title the PlayStation 3 has been awaiting for two years. On the surface it is the most basic sort of game: the platformer. You jump. You dodge. You avoid pits of fire and grab shiny orbs of goodness to get points. The nuance is in the combination of those elements, just as the nuance of baseball is in the combination of timing, speed, coordination and thought. But what makes LBP special is that it gives players the ability and mechanisms to create their own virtual playgrounds, in addition to navigating the wonderlands devised by the professionals.

When I first got a PS3 in 2006, I wrote publicly to Sony's chairman: "Howard Stringer, you have a problem. Your company's new video game system just isn't that great."

Finally the PS3 has, if not a savior, at least a champion. He wears stitches, has a textured complexion and is as hugworthy as any new character in years.
O.K., so his name is Sackboy. Doesn't have to stay that way. Call him whatever you want. No matter: LittleBigPlanet is an infectiously endearing gem of high-definition entertainment, and one of the best indications of where mass media is headed.

That's because this is more a system than a product. Most traditional entertainment is about providing an artifact — a book, a script, a show, a score, a performance — that is then preserved, passed on and reinterpreted. There's nothing wrong with that. But new entertainment — social networks, games, online communities — is about empowering everyday people to express themselves and interact without a central arbiter. The thing is, interactive entertainment is much harder to design than it is to experience. A great game like chess, poker or Tetris should be easy to play at first and then reveal deeper levels of complexity and skill.

LBP wins visually, not because it looks spectacular but because it looks tawdry. The conceit is that you are a three-inch-tall beanbag running around boots and table legs and huge, menacing pets. And it works because you can see all the individual stitches and scuff marks on the side of that sneaker on the floor. You can see the frayed thread suspending that cracked teacup that's about to fall on top of you.

In basic story mode, the game shouldn't take more than 8 or 10 hours, depending on your dexterity. But its dirty, wonderful element is that the scenarios provided by other players are actually much more fun than the polished levels from Media Molecule, the game's developer.

That extends to the game's music, which is surprisingly fluent and sophisticated. Sony is a global corporation, but I was nonetheless impressed, as I traveled in the game from continent to continent, to hear the music evolve within a fairly worldly repertory.

Too worldly, perhaps. Just after I finished the game the first time, I learned that its release had been delayed a week to get rid of a song that included lyrics from the Koran. Obviously Sony does not want to be the next Danish cartoonist or Dutch filmmaker, hounded or even killed by extremists.

But it does make you wonder just how violent a minority must become before multinational corporations stop going out of their way to mock it for cheap laughs. After all, in LBP Sony had no problem staging a big black guy with fat lips in place of the famous ape in a level that seems to be a tribute to the arcade classic Donkey Kong.

But we live with these things in the realm of popular media. They're just being ironic, right?

Frankly, I felt a little guilty at first for thinking LittleBigPlanet's level-editing tools were cooler than the game itself. But then I realized that putting the power to make and share myriad visions — a haunted castle, a rocket race, a journey through the human body — is so much more interesting than celebrating one particular creation.

Of course, as with any such tool, even one as simple as a pencil, the mere fact that anyone can use it does not a genius make. It takes hours of effort and deep thought to assemble anything that other people find entertaining. Creating a level in LBP means spending an entire afternoon or weekend staring at the television, dragging and dropping the prosaic building blocks of a game: ramps, jumps and obstacles.

You can then share your progeny through the PS3's Internet connection. Sony has made it easy and intuitive on screen to find what other people have made, whether that is a fanciful Super Mario Bros. re-creation or a journey through someone's sock drawer.

None of the major companies that make game systems — Sony, Microsoft or Nintendo — has been known to embrace user-created content. Instead all three have been overcontrolling and paranoid. That it is Sony that has opened the avenues of creativity is no small shock. I haven't hesitated to call out Sony's missteps. Sir Howard, this time...
your people got it right.