

Games and Culture

<http://gac.sagepub.com/>

When the Game Is Not Enough: Motivations and Practices Among Computer Game Modding Culture

Olli Sotamaa

Games and Culture 2010 5: 239 originally published online 7 May 2010
DOI: 10.1177/1555412009359765

The online version of this article can be found at:
<http://gac.sagepub.com/content/5/3/239>

Published by:



<http://www.sagepublications.com>

Additional services and information for *Games and Culture* can be found at:

Email Alerts: <http://gac.sagepub.com/cgi/alerts>

Subscriptions: <http://gac.sagepub.com/subscriptions>

Reprints: <http://www.sagepub.com/journalsReprints.nav>

Permissions: <http://www.sagepub.com/journalsPermissions.nav>

Citations: <http://gac.sagepub.com/content/5/3/239.refs.html>

When the Game Is Not Enough: Motivations and Practices Among Computer Game Modding Culture

Games and Culture

5(3) 239-255

© The Author(s) 2010

Reprints and permission:

sagepub.com/journalsPermissions.nav

DOI: 10.1177/1555412009359765

<http://gac.sagepub.com>



Olli Sotamaa¹

Abstract

The actual meanings computer game modders attach to their actions and practices remain heavily underresearched. This article takes a look at the attitudes and everyday practices of the people who make game modifications, with special focus on the forms and consequences of collaboration between hobbyists. The case discussed in the article is the shooter-game Operation Flashpoint (OFP) and the modding scene around it. The article proposes that there is no such thing as an average computer game modder. It is suggested that the distinctions can be drawn based on the objective of projects (missions, add-ons, mods), modder motivations (playing, hacking, researching, self-expression, cooperation), and notions on the ownership and potential commercialization of their work. Given the forecasts concerning the growing significance of player-made content, this study can offer some down-to-earth findings from the long established tradition of game modding.

Keywords

computer game modifications, modding, game fans, player production

¹ University of Tampere, Finland.

Corresponding Author:

Olli Sotamaa, University of Tampere, Kanslerinrinne 1, 33014 University of Tampere, Finland.

Email: olli.sotamaa@uta.fi

Introduction

The history of digital games has for long been a history of hobbyists and though the games industry has in the past decades significantly matured, the productive potentials of player populations are still central in understanding the nature of contemporary games. Modifications, also known as mods, are an intriguing and long-lasting form of player production and have been an essential part of PC gaming for over a decade now. In short, mods are digital artefacts that avid gamers design by tinkering with their favorite games. Mod makers, or “modders” who form large online teams and voluntarily cooperate with the game industry, are worth examining, not only because the modder culture is a fascinating subject of study in its own right but also because they offer a telling example of the contemporary overlap between media consumption and production. In this respect, examining modder cultures can offer a peephole to some of the dynamics that define the relations between players and the game industry.

Among computer games, “mod” is originally short for “modify” or “modification” and refers to player-made alterations and additions to preexisting games. Although mods have become a popular example both in new media literature (Lister, Dovey, Giddings, Grant, & Kelly, 2003) and game design writings (Salen & Zimmerman, 2003), so far the actual meanings modders themselves attach to their actions and practices remain heavily underresearched. In this article, I am interested in examining the attitudes and everyday practices of modders with special focus on the forms and consequences of collaboration between hobbyists.

Early academic accounts on gamer-made designs highlight the artistic dimensions of “game patches.” Mods have been both considered “hacker art” and suggested to follow political photomontages and scratch video as a manifestation of “tactical media” (Huhtamo, 1999; Schleiner, 1999). These accounts position mods in clear opposition with the products of corporate media culture and propose them to be a new way of revealing the means and questioning the truths of mainstream media. The obvious strength of these approaches lies in their ambition to sketch a historical context for a phenomenon so enthusiastically celebrated as something completely new and revolutionary. However, what they mostly fail to see is the deeply contradictory nature computer games hold as popular cultural objects. As Stuart Hall (1981) suggests, popular culture is neither wholly corrupt nor wholly authentic, but popular reception contains both “progressive elements and stone-age elements.” Early approaches also mostly bypass the significance of online networks that often originate in playing the game with others and in the course of time develop into long-lasting and intense relationships.

The theoretical underpinning of this study owes to the recent discussions in which the questions of modder agency and their complex and mutually beneficial relations with the game industry have been elaborated. The support mod making has gained from the game industry has been crucial in the rise of the modding phenomenon as a whole. At the same time, mods and modders can be highly significant for the success

of a particular game (Kücklich, 2005; Nieborg, 2005; Postigo, 2003; Sotamaa 2007). Following these lines of thought, the primary objective of this article is neither to celebrate a new art form nor to portray modders as a new generation of cultural radicals. Instead, the focus of the article is on the often contradictory everyday practices and accounts modders produce as particular kind of media fans.

Overview of the Case Study

The case discussed in the article is the shooter-game Operation Flashpoint (OFP) and the modding scene around it. OFP modder community was chosen as the object of study for several reasons. Although the game has been both a critical and commercial success, OFP mod scene has not received similar attention as some other modder-friendly games. OFP is developed by a relatively small Czech studio called Bohemia Interactive (BI). Focusing on a single game title has enabled BI development team to support emerging mod culture in such ways the game industry giants tied to tight schedules can seldom afford. OFP was released in 2001 and rapidly became the No. 1 selling PC game in several countries. Soon BI released some of their developer tools, first to a chosen group of individual hobbyists and later openly in the Internet. Since 2001, BI has also hosted an active Web forum where gamers, modders, and development team members discuss issues related to the game.

Later on, BI has developed both Virtual Battlespace Systems 1 (VBS1, 2004) and Armed Assault (ArmA, 2007). VBS1 is a for-profit production aimed at military communities and based on the OFP technology. The simulation is used by many armed forces around the world (the United States, Israel, and Australia among others). The open architecture of VBS1 enables very OFP-like modding features, and some spillover between OFP and VBS1 mod scenes can be seen to happen. As most of my interviews precede the success of VBS1 and the launch of ArmA, the primary empirical data unfortunately do not support a more detailed study between the scenes. In other words, while the potential overlap between military and civilian mod communities would obviously be a fascinating object of study, the research data tell unfortunately little about the issue. ArmA, then again, is a successor of OFP, featuring a new and improved game engine. As the new engine also opens new possibilities for modding, many of the hobbyists have at the time of writing moved from OFP to ArmA. I will shortly come back to ArmA at the end of the article. All in all, the primary focus of the article is on OFP, and the other projects are discussed as far as the empirical data give reason for this.

OFP can be categorized as a military shooter simulation. It uses the first-person point perspective but differs from the typical representatives of the genre in several aspects. Fast-paced “in-your-face combat” is replaced with very large game worlds and often the enemies are engaged at very long ranges. Tactics wise cooperation is invariably appreciated over individual heroics. Although the frame story is fictional, the game reviews often celebrate OFP’s ability to create “the realistic illusion of

being in the middle of a full-blown war.” The “realism,” though, is based more on the open game play schema than on the photorealistic graphics.

In the first phase of the research project, the lead moderator of the official OFP forum was consulted and the adequate way to publish an open invitation for modders was discussed. To deliver some background information for the potential participants, the invitation message had a link to the Web site that included some basic information of the researcher. To produce a mutual relationship with the participants, some central findings were promised to be documented on the forum. The questions focused on the following issues: origins of a personal modder career, general views on the OFP mod community, notions on the diversity and quality of user-created content, skills used and learned, contacts and collaboration with other modders, and opinions on the workings and support of the game developer. In the following weeks, answers from 23 OFP modders in total were received.

In addition to the participants, who were recruited via the official forum, a local mod team was contacted. Originally, the idea was to interview them face-to-face because there was at the time no guarantee how the e-mail interviews would succeed. In the end, the Finnish modders also mostly preferred an e-mail interview and only one interview was conducted face-to-face. Still, this alternative approach was valuable as the six members of the same project team proved to be a strategic source in clarifying the daily practices, different roles inside the team, and the ways of cooperation. The participants were all male, represented 13 different nationalities, and their ages varied from 15 to 40 (average age 23).¹ Approximately half of the 29 interviewees were students, while the other half came from a variety of backgrounds including a couple of programmers, an artist, a tradesman, and a doctor of physics.

Later on, more focused personal questions were sent to approximately one third of the first-phase participants. In addition, many informal conversations with the modding community members took place and some feedback was received via the official forum. Sometimes, the modders also referred to discussions and particular threads on the forums. Thus, eventually the interviews had to be analyzed in close relation to earlier and simultaneous discussions on the Web fora.

Modders as Game Fans and Beyond

Consalvo (2003, p. 326–327) has listed several similarities between digital game players and television fans ranging from the sophisticated understanding of the text and its relations to other texts to creating Web sites and fan fiction. Examining digital game players as fans provides a challenge for the common discourses that position games as antisocial, isolating, or creatively stifling. Scrutinizing the practices that surround the playing of games helps to uncover the creative and productive potentials embedded in players. Some forms of player productivity contribute directly to the result of the game, while others grow from only remotely game-related expressive intentions. Computer game mods that facilitate new forms of play,

fix bugs, and produce completely new audiovisual environments can execute both instrumental and expressive purposes (Newman, 2005; Wirman, 2007).

In their study of enthusiastic television audiences, Abercrombie and Longhurst (1998) make a distinction between “consumer,” “fan,” “cultist,” “enthusiast,” and “petty producer.” This continuum is based both on the dedication of the media consumer and on the role of personal media production in their experience. While the “regular” consumer is not extensively engaged in productive activities, the practices of petty producer can become close to those of media professionals.² The description of petty producer whose textual outputs are no more limited to the immediate fan community fits relatively well to modders whose projects are celebrated and played by masses of gamers. There are, however, clear challenges in placing modders into the continuum of fan identities. I will in the following consider some of these challenges because they provide a way to expose some of the particularities modders hold among media fans.

First of all, the way Abercrombie and Longhurst (1998) organize the spectrum of identities appears to be somewhat hierarchical. Naming modders “the petty producers of game culture” comes therefore close to saying that mod making is the highest condition of creativity one can reach among computer games. This is very problematic as the objective of this study is not to value the research subjects or list some sort of order of superiority among game cultural phenomena. As modding is obviously just one example of the ways of acquiring “gaming capital” and expressing one’s identification with games, the actual modder perceptions concerning issues of identity and cooperation and the larger conditions that generate these notions are in focus here.

Second, it seems that the devoted following is not only attached to the products of commercial game industry but popular mods can similarly become objects of fan enthusiasm. The fans of particular mods do not only praise and celebrate the projects but also actively offer their ideas and even demand new features. As one of the participants puts it, “the things that frustrate me the most [in modding] are non-constructive critique and the impatient ‘fans’” (OFP24).³ My intention here is not to claim that fan productions that gain fan following of their own are something entirely new but to simply illustrate the limitations of such classifications that focus merely on the relationship between the original game text and an individual game fan. Third, modders themselves are far from a homogeneous group. Modders hold a particular role among game fans but there are significant differences between motivations and practices also inside the group. Therefore, it is obvious that more detailed and multifaceted groupings need to be established.

Different Motivations and Roles

Postigo (2007, p. 309-310) identifies three central motivations behind PC game modding. First of all, hobbyists consider modding as an artistic endeavor and a creative outlet. Second, modding allows people to identify with the games and increase their enjoyment with the game. Finally, many hobbyists see modding as a channel of

acquiring a job in the game industry. While the same three motivations can be identified among OFP modders, the empirical data enable me to formulate far more detailed groupings.

An easy starting point for grouping modders is to take a look at the actual outputs of modding scene. In this regard, OFP modders can be roughly divided into three different categories: mission makers, add-on makers, and mod makers.⁴ Clearly, these categories are overlapping and not fixed, but they help give an overview on the organization of different actors among OFP modder scene. Based on the interviews, the most common way to begin OFP modding was fiddling with the in-game mission editor. In the beginning, one picks from the five available islands and starts to construct an assignment from the given selection of objects and properties. Although the combinations created in the mission editor are unique, they still consist of preexisting elements. This limitation often inspires gamers to experiment with add-ons.

It was through the mission editor I got into making addons. [—] However, you can't make missions without addons, and this one team had a shortage of addon makers. It wasn't long before I downloaded o2 [Oxygen Light, the official modelling tool] and started making stuff. (OFP13)

Add-ons can range from single objects such as plants and buildings to operational vehicles and weapons, modified squads, and complete islands. Compared to mission making, add-ons typically demand more working phases and more specialized tools. Single add-ons are often collected to a theme-based add-on pack to simplify downloading. In the context of OFP, the expression “mod” equals a thematic combination of missions and add-ons. In other connections, the term “total conversion” is often used. When the missions form together a continuous plot, a mod is said to include a “campaign.” It is, however, important to bear in mind that the modder categories do not follow any simple hierarchy. Not all hobbyists set their sights to making ambitious mods but many are more than happy to develop their skills as innovative mission makers. Several of the most appreciated coalitions inside OFP community are not actually working on mods but on add-ons and add-on packs.

Ambitious OFP mod projects require a lot of time and a variety of different skills and therefore typically employ several people.

[A]lthough Flashpoint enables really diversified mod-making, it is difficult to begin anything really distinct alone since no-one does anything with a single Second World War tank without a proper WW2 mod. (OFP25)

[A]ddons are the base off all modding and a “tradition” that every modder has to master, but I like mods as they often test your skills both in the field off modding but also socially. (OFP19)

The staff listings of mod team Web sites mostly follow the same pattern: experts of different areas (scripting, config coding, modeling, texturing, interface design,

animation, sounds and music, web design) are gathered together by project leaders. Some people specialize in documentation and tool development, while others focus on beta testing different versions. The specified roles can be seen to reflect the development of digital games in a larger scale. While in the early days of game development the actual work was almost entirely programming-oriented, different professional roles started to emerge in the 1980s, when the scale and complexity of digital games began to increase. A somewhat similar development can be identified among game modifications some years later (Laukkanen, 2005). An often repeated example is the case of *Doom* (1993), in which the media files were separated from the main program and made accessible for users. This intentional design choice supported the emergence of specified skills and division of modders into different roles. Interestingly, the parallel holds true in regard to the contemporary situation where game development is considered highly labor-intensive business. Lengthy production times and large development teams are not, however, limited to commercial development studios but the developing complexity of technologies has also forced mod projects to recruit an increasing number of team members.

Looking only at team listings may give an impression of well-defined roles and structured organization. However, the everyday reality can still be a bit different:

The roles in this project have been quite unsteady. The only thing I haven't touched are the scripts. [—] Basically almost everyone has freely worked on other people's branches and you can't speak of such clearly defined assignments and duties as they probably have in IT companies. The matters are discussed in IRC [Internet Relay Chat] every evening. (OFP26)

Furthermore, the core team is often supplemented with “collaborative members.” Mostly, this means independent add-on makers who donate their add-ons to mod teams to get more attention to their work. In this respect, mod team organization follows a model familiar with the open source development. In this “onion model,” the contributors vary from the “project lead” and “core members” to less active members of the community (Mikkonen, Vadén, & Vainio, 2007). The different roles inside a mod team also indicate different motivations among modders. In the following, a new grouping, based on the different modder motivations identified in the interviews, is introduced.

Although the classification is based on the research data collected among OFP modders, I suggest similar approaches can be identified among other games as well.⁵ The grouping is intentionally based on actions, not on actors, because a single modder may hold several of these standpoints at the same time. In the table, the different motivations are accompanied by illustrative quotes from the interviews (Table 1).

The first, and perhaps the most obvious, motivation rises from the need to extract as much as possible from the game. Creating new playgrounds and play objects make meaningful play possible after the players know the original environments inside out. With self-made environments, the game is not only extended but also

Table 1. Key Modder Motivations

Playing	I enjoyed the game, then got into Internet community and tried to develop my own things, because the game seemed to be kinda “incomplete” or I had idea I desperately needed to put working into game:). (OFP1)
Hacking	It was probably the pure interest in the way Flashpoint “works.” [—] I’ve always been interested in studying how different things work, already as a kid I had to take all the toys to pieces. [—] Especially in the early days of OFP it was interesting since everything was unknown and a big part of the process was to discover the ways to implement your ideas. (OFP24)
Researching	Some products are quite mature, made by technicians and/or soldiers (or military fans) who spend more time gathering information sources than actually building addons and missions. (OFP1)
Artistic expression	The best thing in modding is the experience of creation, it s like painting a picture. (OFP27)
Cooperation	In brief I would say that the most enjoyable part of modding has been the cooperation and the creation of ideas with other team members and the enthusiasm to work towards a shared goal. (OFP26)

customized and personalized. Second, modding can be seen as a contemporary game cultural manifestation of the “hacker legacy.”⁶ Programming-oriented modders often accentuate the challenge the games pose as complex code-based systems. Besides, advanced knowledge in modding is not acquired through formal education but by playing with the code. Third, if hackers enthusiastically examine the details of the code, a research-oriented modder wants to clarify the background and the details of the subject matter. In case of OFP, this can mean anything from a piece of historical information to a clear picture of the object to be modeled. Furthermore, it can be argued, that every modder uses the game in some regard as a medium of expression. The motivation can vary from purely aesthetic to a more political one. Finally, for some people visiting the forums and participating the mod projects is primarily a way to find other similar-minded people. As Postigo (2003) points out, a need to transcend alienation can be identified within mod communities. Furthermore, the larger the mod project, the more important the social skills become.

As mentioned earlier, the motivations and roles can change in the course of time. It is beyond my data to sketch detailed lifecycles or development tracks for modders. One noticeable change, however, can be identified. This transition is related to the nature of playing the game and especially time used for it. In the words of one participant:

[R]ecently nearly every time I’ve launched the game, it has been to test some new component, stress some theoretical limit, evaluate the performance and characteristics of some one else’s new content, look for defects in my or other’s content, and so on. A very small portion of my time now is actually spent “playing” in the normal sense. (OFP4)

The quote can be interpreted to reflect a development of particular kind of critical competence. However, the game that caused the initial inspiration is obviously not the same any more.

In regard to online gaming, Taylor (2006, p. 151-154) suggests that researchers should pay more attention to the messy and contested boundary between online and off-line: “[a]ccentuating the “fantastical” dimensions of game worlds can prevent a nuanced understanding of games as mundane objects.” In this connection, it is interesting to notice that mod makers motivations are often tightly connected to their existing skills and hobbies. Modders mention several different expertises they have found beneficial in modding projects:

Just interested in general war history and the machines that came from it. Made a lot of the plastic model kits and crafted my own models from balsa when I was a munchkin. (OFP5)

I enjoy the outdoors, and rebuilding things, and that’s where most of my modding work seems to go in OFP, in working with mapping tools and tweaking things. (OFP4)

When making add-ons you can make good use of your knowledge, whether you are a history freak, a miniature modeller, a boater or a more into outdoors activities and wildlife. (OFP26)

Here, we witness exceedingly smooth crossings of the boundary between “real” and “virtual.” Hobbyists do not create their projects in a vacuum but their “real-world” interests and know-how become an inseparable part of their online projects. One of the OFP modders explained that to get some details right, he routinely contacts military collectors, army surplus shops, or military personnel. Furthermore, in the beginning of their task list, modelers often mentioned a visit to a library or a museum. All the examples above support a need for more multifaceted and nonstereotypical notion of the relationship between “real” and “virtual” within modder lifeworld.

On Cooperation and Community

The forms of collaboration between OFP mod community members are relatively diverse. Advice concerning technical details is asked for and openly given on the forums. The forums are also used as a source of feedback: released beta versions are advertised to receive comments and bug reports. Furthermore, experienced modders write tutorials and publish them on their Web sites. This is highly significant because although BI has released a variety of modding tools, the documentation is very limited and therefore most of the learning takes place through trial and error. The following excerpt reveals well the various possibilities a mod maker has when in need of help:

The 1st consultation is within the mod. Then its my immediate (and trusted) contacts in the OFP world [-] . . . after that I would pop over to OFPEC [Operation Flashpoint Editing Centre], see if I can find a tute, if not, post a question in the forums. (OFP13)

Cooperation is, however, not limited to advising others but often modders find mutual objectives and decide to join forces. Different mod projects often need similar objects and therefore it is no surprise that add-ons are often borrowed and lent or cooperatively created.

[T]here is a mod we are pooling our resources with, everyone benefits, the public get one comprehensive add-on pack, we both have to put in less work, we both get to share out expertise, and the pack will be completed sooner. (OFP13)

Not only is the cooperation visible between independent mod teams, but the whole international network of projects and individual modders seems to be able to agree on particular issues.

In the following, two initiatives, namely “OFP Tags” and “Joint Ammo and Magazines (JAM) add-on,” are shortly introduced to highlight the organization and influence of the OFP mod community. Furthermore, some of the disharmonies the community has witnessed are discussed. OFP Tags were introduced in 2002, as a way of avoiding conflicts between different add-on and mission makers.⁷ A tag is a three- to five-letter identifier that is individual to each designer. Modified files and classes are marked with the tag so that other people are able to see what has been altered and by whom. An add-on without a tag can cause a conflict with another add-on and may make the game malfunction. Later on, because the system was so effective and well received, it was officially adopted by BI as a requirement for their add-on initiative. Today, almost every respected modder and mod project has an individual tag. Over 1,200 registered tags belonging either to teams or to individual modders are registered in Operation Flashpoint Editing Centre (OFPEC).

Another telling case discussed in several interviews is the JAM. Because every mod team codes their magazines using unique tags, even similar weapons cannot chamber the magazines tagged by another team. The purpose of JAM is to allow multiple weapons to share common ammo and magazines and thus make add-ons of different teams more compatible with each other by introducing a common set of values. The success of this attempt to standardize add-ons was in the beginning quite modest because the majority of the OFP mod teams did not agree to join the project. Many modder groups found the agreement too “Nato-friendly” and complained about the lack of fairness in the values specified for particular add-ons. In the interviews, the founders of the projects were described as “overbearing” and “contemptuous.” Members of the U.S.-based group responsible for the proposal emphasized that they had actively sought input from everyone and were very disappointed for the lack of collaboration. Currently, the project has proceeded to Version 3 and several recent mods require JAM 3 to work properly.

As hinted in the case of JAM, the global fan base has its consequences. Ambitious projects originate in various European countries, United States, Canada, Australia, Russia, Japan, Singapore, and so on. While the “official” language on Web sites and

Internet forums is English, some modders feel unequal and misinterpretations tend to happen. Some teams have voluntarily shut themselves off the international cooperation and created active local forums where they operate by using their native language.

Although advanced use of the Internet enables teams and methods of cooperation to be overtly global, the subject matters are often extraordinarily local. Several projects (SwissMod, Finnish Defence Forces) focus on constructing virtual representations of local environments and troops. Also projects focusing on particular historical events (Operation Gulf War Crisis, Battle over Hokkaido, 1982: Flashpoint in the Falklands) often have a national emphasis. Understandably, these kinds of themes tend to open up openly political debates among mod makers. While the real-life cold war is long gone, some of the attitudes seem to be still alive in the virtual battlefields. Alongside the happy cooperation, some rivalry and friction also exist between mod teams. The following quotation from an interviewee nicely concludes this discussion:

[T]he community as a whole is like a family. But not like a perfect family, it is like a real family: there are people you like and you dislike. And sure, there are cliques. The most annoying clique are those who think they are the total elite of OFP. (OFP8)

Ownership of Cocreated Virtual Items

So far, it has become clear that the inputs of the OFP modding scene are products of wide-ranging team work. Furthermore, as Sue Morris (2004) notes, games are “cocreative media” in the way both the input of developers and players are required. Mods could not, in the first place, work without the original game, and modding in general would be a much harder without the bundled tools and the support from the developer. Then again, during the years, ambitious mods have significantly influenced the image players attach with OFP. In this respect, it can be said that the experience of the majority of avid OFP players is these days comprehensively influenced by the modifications.

Suggesting that the very product of the game is produced in conjunction with the players immediately activates the question about ownership (Taylor, 2006, p. 125-150). Fan studies have traditionally been somewhat hesitant or even reluctant to theorize the reconfigurations concerning the boundaries between commercial culture and the products of fandom (Banks, 2003). Lately, the convergence of fan cultures and corporate cultures has, however, raised the need for less dichotomic models (Jenkins, 2002, 2006). At the same time, scholars who investigate the real money trade of game items have suggested that players’ ability to own “virtual properties” is posing significant ramifications for player communities as well as game developers and operators (Castronova, 2005; Lehdonvirta, 2007). This is highly relevant also from the perspective of modding as the recent takes on the subject suggest that the moral economy of modding is challenging the current copyright-based

ownership paradigm (Postigo, 2008) and that modding has already become an industry of its own (Nieborg & van der Graaf, 2008). Viewed in this light, it is intriguing to examine the ways modders themselves are able and willing to conceptualize the issues of ownership and the commercial potential of their work.

It is somewhat symptomatic that in many interviews, the participants want to accentuate how most of the things are done “for free” and how modders “do not get paid.” On one hand, modders are proud of the nonprofit basis of their endeavors. On the other hand, this argument is used to explain why more ambitious projects were at least at the time of interviews not possible. Altogether, the issue of ownership seems to be interestingly contested as the different discourses of “free,” nonproprietary and commercial are happily mixed together.

Many groups clearly follow a sort of open source approach in which the development work is seen more as communal project, and individual developers and teams work toward a common goal. Reworking someone else’s work is not regarded as theft but more as paying homage to a good job, as long as the author of the original is credited for his or her part.

Mostly all mod and add-on makers have a sort of gentlemen’s agreement and if others’ units are “borrowed” it is always mentioned and credit is given. (OFP26)

Thus, these mod projects apply a structure very close to the idea of “copyleft” introduced among free software developers. This method for making a piece of code free requires all modified and extended versions of this code to be free software as well. This interpretation of “free” is at the same time both fair and demanding: redistribution of the software, with or without changes, always includes the freedom to further copy and change it.

Because both copying add-ons from a modder site to one’s hard drive and republishing them in one’s own name is very simple, sometimes straightforward duplicating happens. Offences of this kind have led some of the add-on makers to suggest ways to encrypt the objects so that no one else can alter them. Within OFP modding scene, the offences have, however, been relatively rare, and therefore, these “newbie blunders” are mostly tolerated by the community. Nevertheless, the idea that something that is “free” can be “stolen” indicates that although seldom, commercially exploited OFP mods do have a value of some sort. Furthermore, modders use a variety of tactics in controlling their contributions. Some of the interviewees also paid attention to the different approaches applied:

There are two “categories” of modders in the community: 1. Those who do it for fun/to better the game/to add content/to enjoy themselves. 2. Those who do it for personal gain/“popularity”/status. (OFP10)

There are definitely cliques. The friction, to me, is between those who mod because they like to mod and those who mod to be the best at modding. The latter are probably in it for potential employment. (OFP11)

Although I am sympathetic to the opinions presented above, I suggest that one should not consider the OFP mod scene as two entirely separated camps. Instead, the described categories can be seen as alternative approaches a single modder can apply at different times.

It has been argued that the game industry can clearly benefit from a perception that all the activities associated with games can be seen as play and therefore nonprofit-oriented (Kline, Dyer-Witheford, & de Peuter, 2003, pp. 197-217, Kücklich, 2005). As long as game industry can preserve the situation in which the mod makers are happy to work for free the developers and the publishers can clearly benefit from selling the retail titles needed for playing the modifications. Not surprisingly, alternative ideas more favorable to the commercial aspects have emerged alongside the “free software model.” As one of the modders formulates:

Although I am currently very open minded about lending my work to others, I noticed that my point of view is changing. With the release of VBS1, the prospect of OFP2, and my work and knowledge getting more and more sophisticated, I am considering ways to partially commercialize my work. (OFP4)

Several game developers have openly admitted that today mod projects are often used as a portfolio when applying a job in game industry. Based on my interviews, the modder attitudes on getting recruited vary a lot. Basically, the younger hobbyists who are only starting their modder “career” see the opportunity very tempting. Somewhat paradoxically, the experienced modders who actually might have a chance to acquire a job are more skeptical on the matter. Furthermore, some participants explained that modding had inspired them to apply for a job outside game industry (programming, military intelligence, etc.). However, although some informants were capable of perceiving the current structural disproportion between the modders and the industry, and others had even been offered a job related to digital games, many still highlighted the benefits of leaving modding just a hobby.

All was well, until the lead started demanding things. Mod making is my hobby. People can only demand things from me if it's business-related. (OFP15)

I never wanted this hobby of mine to become a serious work—as I probably said before, modding is very relaxing and I do it just when I feel like to do it. I doubt my creations would have the same quality if I would be forced to produce certain amount of textures per day or so. (OFP6)

However, one has to be careful here not to draw too strict boundaries between work and hobby. Hobbies can certainly provide compensatory balance to work life. At the same time, some hobbies can be seen as “productive leisure,” which integrate work and leisure and permit people to engage in work-like behavior in a noncoercive environment (Gelber, 1999). Furthermore, although modders may not have the status of

game industry professionals, many of them possess advanced skills and practice professions that have a significant contribution to the mod community. These complex relations once again highlight the need for understanding more in detail the relations between the game developers and game hobbyists like modders. The models for understanding these relations should be flexible as in some cases the processes hobbyists have voluntarily created may even be too demanding for the industry:

Given the fast-paced holiday-oriented structure of game development though, I doubt that there is much of a demand for slower, more methodical testing and rebuilding that I could offer. (OFP4)

Coda

Given the forecasts concerning the significance of player-made content, this study can offer some down-to-earth findings from the long established tradition of game modding. What the article proposes is that there is no such thing as an average computer game modder. The empirical data have made it possible to discuss both a spectrum of contradictory modder identities and the different contexts that govern the production of them. In case of OFP, a preliminary division can be based on whether modders focus on making missions, add-ons, or large-scale mods. Interest in modding often originates from playing the game but further motivations can range from hacking and researching to self-expression and community building. Furthermore, the potential commercialization of hobbyist work is clearly drawing diverse reactions among mod makers.

As discussed, the emergence of modding is not entirely up to active hobbyists. The decisions made by the game developer have a significant influence on the “moddability” of the game. The launch of ArmA, the sequel of OFP, is a good example of the diversity of things that can actually influence the conditions in which modders operate. At the time of writing, almost 4 years after the research project started and approximately 1½ years after the launch of ArmA, the OFP/ArmA modding scene is in the middle of interesting developments. Even though the reception ArmA has mostly been enthusiastic among OFP fans, the launch has not been completely without contradictions. The game has different publishers for different countries and this has resulted in multiple launch dates. In addition, the new ArmA compatible versions of the official modding tools have been launched only recently. The first impressions within the community indicate that significantly more time and work is required to get visible results. This is mostly up to the requirements of the improved graphics engine. It also seems that significant changes are required to existing OFP content before it can be imported into ArmA. For these reasons, the whole community seems to be a little uncertain of the exact future directions. The members of the Finnish project, I have followed, have reported that the development of the new version for ArmA is under way. Although some early screen captures have been made public on the ArmA forums, the team has so far chosen to keep

relatively low profile. Although the team has several people enthusiastically working on the new project, it seems that several months will still pass before any substantial contributions.

Finally, some of the modders who participated my interviews are still active in the community and have mostly moved over to the ArmA projects. Others have largely left OFP behind. A few participants have found full-time or part-time employment from game development projects. A couple of these people hold a position at BI or have contributed to other BI projects (VBS1). Although no generalizations can be made, the individual examples support the idea that the jump from modding to game industry is possible. The option, however, is obviously not available for anyone. To be considered a potential recruit, one has to be able to illustrate skills and discipline very similar to the professional development. If we, however, want to further examine this spillover between hobbyism and professionalism and to capture the detailed modder status changes within this process, a more systematic longitudinal study is required.

Notes

1. Not all modding scenes are as explicitly dominated by male participants. A noticeable proportion of, for example, The Sims modders are female. In case of OFP, the combination of shooter genre and the military theme are arguably the main reasons for the imbalance. I was contacted by one female OFP modder and we changed a couple of e-mails but in the end she did not have the time to fill in the questionnaire.
2. It has been argued by many scholars that the different stages of media consumption defined by Abercrombie and Longhurst (1998) are actually very difficult to differentiate from each other in practice. See Herkman (2001, pp. 194-195) and Nikunen (2003) for more details.
3. The quotations are distinguished with a marking that includes the number of the interview. The quotations from interviews conducted in Finnish are translated by the author.
4. In OFP modder language, "mod" refers primarily to the large thematic entities that consist of combinations of missions and add-on packs. The term is, however, also commonly used in a wider sense to refer to the various projects of the modding community.
5. Laukkanen (2007) who has studied modders of Half-Life, The Sims, and Grand Theft Auto series comes up with a relatively similar grouping.
6. For more about hacker culture, see Levy (1984) and Thomas (2003).
7. OFPEC that introduced "tags" to the community is an independent repository for editing resources. (Retrieved September 4, 2008, from <http://www.ofpec.com/>)

Declaration of Conflict of Interests

The authors declared no conflicts of interest with respect to the authorship and/or publication of this article.

Funding

The authors received no financial support for the research and/or authorship of this article.

References

- Abercrombie, N., & Longhurst, B. (1998). *Audiences: A sociological theory of performance and imagination*. London: SAGE.
- Banks, J. A. L. (2003, May 19-23). Negotiating participatory culture in the new media environment: Auran and the Trainz online community—An (im)possible relation. In *Proceedings of the Fifth International Digital Arts and Culture Conference*. Melbourne, Australia: RMIT.
- Castronova, E. (2005). *Synthetic worlds: The business and culture of online games*. University of Chicago Press.
- Consalvo, M. (2003). Zelda 64 and video game fans. *Television & New Media*, 4, 321-334.
- Gelber, S. M. (1999). *Hobbies: Leisure and the culture of work in America*. New York: Columbia University Press.
- Hall, S. (1981). Notes on deconstructing “the popular.” In R. Samuel (Ed.), *People’s history and socialist theory* (pp. 227-239). London: Routledge.
- Herkman, J. (2001). *Audiovisuaalinen kulttuuri*. Tampere: Vastapaino.
- Huhtamo, E. (1999). Game patch—The son of scratch? *SWITCH*, 12. Retrieved September 4, 2008, from http://switch.sjsu.edu/nextswitch/switch_engine/front/front.php?artc=119
- Jenkins, H. (2002). Interactive audiences? The ‘collective intelligence’ of media fans. In D. Harries (Ed.), *The new media book* (pp. 157-176). London: British Film Institute.
- Jenkins, H. (2006). *Convergence culture where old and new media collide*. New York: University Press.
- Kline, S., Dyer-Witheford, N., & de Peuter, G. (2003). *Digital play: The interaction of technology, culture, and marketing*. Montreal & Kingston: McGill-Queen’s University Press.
- Kücklich, J. (2005). Precarious playbour: Modders and the digital games industry. *Fibreculture*, 5. Retrieved September 4, 2008, from <http://journal.fibreculture.org/issue5/kucklich.html>
- Laukkanen, T. (2005, January 11-12). Tools of the trade: Exploring modding tools and community “toolsmiths.” Paper presented at Creative Gamers Seminar, University of Tampere.
- Laukkanen, T. (2007). Creative gamers: Examining the modding culture and its mobile prospects. M. Turpeinen, K. Kuikkaniemi, *Mobile content communities* (pp. 137-153). Helsinki: HIIT Publications 2007-1. Retrieved September 4, 2008, from http://pong.hiit.fi/dcc/papers/mc2_final_report.pdf
- Lehdonvirta, V. (2007). Virtual consumerism. M. Turpeinen, K. Kuikkaniemi, *Mobile content communities* (pp. 208-218). Helsinki: HIIT Publications 2007-1. Retrieved September 4, 2008, from http://pong.hiit.fi/dcc/papers/mc2_final_report.pdf
- Levy, S. (1984). *Hackers: Heroes of the computer revolution*. New York: Doubleday.
- Lister, M., Dovey, J., Giddings, S., Grant, I., & Kelly, K. (2003). *New media: A critical introduction*. London: Routledge.
- Mikkonen, T., Vaden T., & Vainio, N. (2007). The protestant ethic strikes back: Open source developers and the ethic of capitalism. *First Monday*, 12. Retrieved September 4, 2008, from <http://www.uic.edu/htbin/cgiwrap/bin/ojs/index.php/fm/article/view/1623/1538>

- Morris, S. (2004, January). Co-creative media: Online multiplayer computer game culture. *Scan*, 1. Retrieved September 4, 2008, from http://www.scan.net.au/scan/journal/display.php?journal_id=16
- Newman, J. (2005). Playing (with) videogames. *Convergence*, 11, 48-67.
- Nieborg, D. (2005, January 11-12). Am I mod or not?—An analysis of first person shooter modification culture. Paper presented at Creative Gamers Seminar, University of Tampere.
- Nieborg, D. B., & van der Graaf, S. (2008). The mod industries? The industrial logic of non-market game production. *European Journal of Cultural Studies*, 11, 177-195.
- Nikunen, K. (2003). Soturiprinsessan matkassa. Xena ja faniuden merkitykset. In U. Kovala & T. Saresma (Eds.), *Kulttuurikirja* (pp. 112-142). Helsinki: SKS.
- Postigo, H. (2003). From Pong to Planet Quake: Post industrial transitions from leisure to work. *Information, Communication & Society*, 6, 593-607.
- Postigo, H. (2007). Of mods and modders: Chasing down the value of fan-based digital game modifications. *Games and Culture*, 2, 300-313.
- Postigo, H. (2008). Video game appropriation through modifications: Attitudes concerning intellectual property among modders and fans. *Convergence*, 14, 59-74.
- Salen, K., & Zimmerman, E. (2003). *Rules of play: Game design fundamentals*. Cambridge: MIT Press.
- Schleiner, A. -M. (1999). Parasitic interventions: Game patches and hacker art. Retrieved September 4, 2008, from <http://www.opensorcery.net/patchnew.html>
- Sotamaa, O. (2007). On modder labour, commodification of play, and mod competitions. *First Monday*, 12. Retrieved September 4, 2007, from <http://www.uic.edu/htbin/cgiwrap/bin/ojs/index.php/fm/article/view/2006/1881>
- Taylor, T. L. (2006). *Play between worlds: Exploring online game culture*. Cambridge: MIT Press.
- Thomas, D. (2003). *Hacker culture*. University of Minnesota Press.
- Wirman, H. (2007). "I am not a fan, I Just play a lot"—If power gamers aren't fans, who are? A. Baba, *Situated play: Proceedings of the Third International Conference of DiGRA* (pp. 377-385). University of Tokyo. Retrieved September 4, 2008, from <http://www.digra.org/dl/db/07311.40368.pdf>

Bio

Olli Sotamaa is senior research fellow in the Department of Information studies and Interactive Media, University of Tampere. He holds a PhD in media studies and has published journal articles and conference papers on various topics including computer game modding, machinima, game achievements, player-centred game design, and mobile games.

**Fonte: Games and Culture, v. 5, n. 3, p. 239-255, 2010.
[Base de Dados]. Disponível em: <www.sagepub.com>.
Acesso em: 25 nov. 2010.**