

Who put the mod in commodification? –

A descriptive analysis of the First Person Shooter mod culture.

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Title

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Abstract

The aim of this paper is to mainly look at the current trends regarding co-created content for First Person Shooter games. The question what constitutes a mod and if there is a need for a definition of mods seems neglected by many authors who simply use the term ‘mod’ for a wide array of user-created game texts. The agency of gamers and the power they can wield when they are collaborative results in implications in relation to the game industry and the content and themes of user-created game modifications. Analysis of the Unreal Universe show game developers and game publishers tapping into the open-source ethos of mod communities and appropriating and institutionalising the mod community. Manifestations of bottom-up acts of producing user-created game content are artificially created in order to fit the needs of game publishers and developers. The Battlefield Franchise shows the creative energy of modders using original themes in a creative fashion but also the implications of using existing Intellectual Property. Although many mods still are meant as pure entertainment and made with no other goal in mind to give gamers a fun experience, there are also mods solely produced to shock, brand, offend, serve as art, serve as a practice tool for murder or get across some sort of ideology.

Keywords

Games, First-Person-Shooter, mod, modification, participatory culture, ideology.

1. Introduction

When I first heard about the plans of Epic Games and Digital Extremes, the developers of the First Person Shooter (FPS) Unreal Tournament 2004 (UT2004) to make a special edition double DVD-set of their newest instalment within their popular and technology advanced Unreal-franchise, there was no doubt in my mind. I did have to buy it. UT2004 is nicely wrapped in a silver box, contains a free sticker, a headset with a microphone and the install DVD of Unreal Tournament is on one DVD in stead of six CD’s, but still, that was not it. It was the second DVD that made me run to my game supplier. The second DVD is packed with more than 150 hours

of expert video tutorials¹ on making (software) modifications (or mods²) for UT2004. The tutorials cover almost all areas of developing content for UT2004, starting with level design, digging into making machinima, learning to make weapons, mutators, characters and vehicles³. Each area is divided into several sub-areas and then divided into several topics, resulting in more than 270 video tutorials. When NY Times journalist Marriot (2003) stated: “*So far, mod makers say, there is no ‘Mod Making for Dummies’ book*”, his statement was only partly true. There is not exactly a book for making mods, but there is more than 150 hours of video material. After starting with the first tutorials on level design, I got hooked up. Making maps with UnrealEd 3.0, the free GUI editor that accompanies UT2004, is very user-friendly and being able to toy with the same tools as the original game developers, is an interesting experience. The words of a mod maker in the New York Times emphasise the thrill of using professional software: “*I see the mod community giving me a sense of what it takes to succeed professionally and what really goes on*,” Mr. Inks said. “*When you start in school you are in awe of everything, but as things go on and you work with it the magic becomes more theory and practice. You get to see what actually goes into this stuff*.” (Marriot, 2003). These observations are similar to my own recent experiences with mod making. Being able to use the same tools as the ‘real guys’, making a mod and then playing it with friends, sharing experiences about it and getting to know other people, who are doing exactly the same thing, is fantastic. Making a well produced and widely published movie will ever be out of reach of my creative and financial possibilities, but the idea of making a UT2004 mod, how small it may be, is not a hallucination, it’s a challenge!

After the successful launch of the Unreal Tournament 2004 Demo (Epic Games, 2004) Atari, UT2004’s publisher, already claimed that it was “*one of the most popular game demo downloads of all time, with more than 1.5 million downloads in the first week of availability*”.⁴ After the success of the demo I had some troubles to get a hand on the special edition of UT2004 and read on several occasions that there were some issues,

¹ The video tutorials are not made by Epic Games or Digital Extremes, but by 3D Buzz. See <http://www.3dbuzz.com> for more information. 3D Buzz specialises in developing Video Training Modules, or VTM’s, for popular 3D software such as 3ds max, Maya and Houdini, but also produces VTM’s on game development, 2D production and web development. Many information and tutorials are freely available. See e.g. http://www.planetunreal.com/architectonic/first_level.html.

² In chapter 2.1 mods are defined. I call them who make mods, modders.

³ In chapter 2.3 the different kinds of mods are discussed.

⁴ “The Unreal Tournament 2004 Demo Launch” CSPORTS.net, 24 February 2004. Available at: <http://www.csports.net/index.aspx?p=News&story=181>. Last visited 31-03-2004.

at least in Holland, with the shipping of the special edition DVD⁵. Modding seems very popular and gamers seem eager to show their (new) craftsmanship.

Morris (2003a) describes the online communities of FPS games as “*vocal, influential, highly social and considers itself selfregulating and, to a certain degree, self-determining.*” And thus putting emphasis on the agency of gamers and the power they can wield when they are collaborative. Being collaborative in the sense of participating in discussions and polls gives users a reason to be part of a community. The notion of collaboration is stretched when gamers begin to produce their own content and thus being even more self-regulating and self-determining, but also actively engaging with the texts which their communities are centred upon. There are several explanations for this rising interest in producing ones own content. Herz (2002) looks at online gamers and argues that: “*online games are the most highly leveraged kind of networked application – one that harnesses next-generation technology to basic patterns of human behaviour: competition, collaboration, the tendency to cluster, and the universal appetite for peer acknowledgement. In other words, the forces that hone games, and gamers, have more to do with anthropology than with code.*” These tendencies are very inherent to the nature of online games and FPS games in particular. Many FPS players are known for their goal-orientedness, something which touches upon the notions of competition, collaboration and peer acknowledgement. Herz warns for the pitfall of only looking at modding as a productive activity and not a social activity. Modders need a community to learn or expand their hobby or to simply show their new mod. Without an online audience it is doubtful whether so many modders would engage in content production.

In this paper I will try to look at the implications of user-agency in relation to the game industry and the content and themes of user-created game modifications. In this paper I will focus solely on FPS games, well known FPS games are DOOM (id Software, 1994) and the Half-Life (Valve, 1998) modification Counter Strike (Minh “Gooseman” Le, 1999). Because of the lack of consensus surrounding the discussion of game genres, I came up with a definition of FPS games in order to narrow down the choice of possible games for analysis. By a FPS is meant: a computer game or simulation where three-dimensional navigation is possible within a virtual environment, through a first person perspective, in which the player interacts in

⁵The following quote shows the success of the SE DVD: “*The special edition two disk DVD version of Unreal Tournament 2004 was a big hit and the limited run of copies sold out almost immediately. Now EBGames is listing a new version of the UT 2004 DVD version coming out on April 13. HomeLAN contacted Epic Games' Mark Rein who confirmed that the two disk DVD version will be back in stores on that date with word that publisher Atari will have an official announcement soon.*” John [Jcal] “UT2004 DVD to be Re-Released” HomeLAN.com, 5 April 2004. Available: <http://www.homelanfed.com/index.php?id=22177>. Last visited: 05-04-2004.

single- or multiplayer combat sequences by using a range of weaponry in order to complete a mission or objective. This definition is for formal use only and is used for narrowing down the list of possible FPS games, not limiting it. A game such as Max Payne 2: The Fall of Max Payne (Remedy, 2003: PC version), using a third person perspective instead of a first person perspective, shows many similarities with elements of the given FPS definition, but is in essence not a FPS. Many of the FPS's discussed in this paper are in the Gamespot Top Ten of FPS's⁶. This list gives a good overview of the most popular FPS's to date and show the reason of their success and their main differences and resemblances. The aim of this paper is to mainly look at the current trends regarding co-created content for FPS games. Before I do this I will shortly go into the question what constitutes a mod and if there is a need for a definition of mods. Many authors seem to neglect this question and simply use the term ‘mod’ for a wide array of user-created game texts. Modifications of games/simulations are not a new phenomenon. For long, users have tinkered with the possibilities of modifying the content and gameplay of games. The earliest computer games⁷ were collaborative texts, (re)produced and (re)distributed by their users. Since the rise computer networks, the ethos of these (virtual) communities consisted of users encouraging each other to enhance and tweak new (gaming) technologies (c.f. Castells, 2003; King & Borland, 2003). Looking at the historical context in which FPS mods originated (e.g. Au, 2002; Kushner, 2003), there are many answers to the origin of the modding ethos and the modding community as it thrives today. The mod community is an interesting site to look at the interplay between consumers and producers of (game)texts, and the role of these communities for both the industry and the community itself. Game developers seem to encourage, harness and take advantage of the modding ethos of sharing recourses and knowledge. In order to give a descriptive analysis of these trends, I have designed a methodology outlined hereafter.

When talking about mods and FPS mods in particular it seems an obvious choice to show the enormous potential and influence of FPS mods on the production, distribution and reception of mods and games by pointing out the huge success of Counter Strike (or CS). This mod still is “*one of the most beloved and popular first-person shooters that has ever been created. Thousands of players at any given moment continue to play the game, despite its relatively outdated graphics, because CS is the closest thing to actually being out there as it gets. (...) What's also been unique for CS and why the game has been able to retain its*

⁶ “Top Ten First Person Shooters” Gamespot. Available <http://www.gamespot.com/features/6091340/index.html>. Last visited 29-03-2004.

⁷ Games/simulations are used in this paper in the broadest way possible. For example computer games for consoles and PC's, but also early arcade games.

popularity over the years is that it's constantly evolving."⁸ This evolving aspect is interesting and could be seen as an important factor in the decision of FPS game developers to make their games moddable. A game that is ever evolving and expanding is more interesting than a game that is simply finished when it hits the shelves. It is important to note that game modifications are not FPS specific. Real Time Strategy (RTS) games/simulations often include a map editor in order to enable users to come up with their own battlegrounds. The popular Command and Conquer series are shipped with map editors, e.g. Command and Conquer: Red Alert 2 (Westwood Studios, 2000), but also the RTS franchise of Warcraft, e.g. the recent and popular Warcraft III: The Reign of Chaos have their map editing software. On the other hand the life-simulation of The Sims (Maxis, 2000) is also an interesting sight for user-created content and an example for user-agency. Will Wright, creator of The Sims-series, said the following on converting gamers into game-designers and what he enjoys about creating games:

"To really put the player in the design role. And the actual world is reactive to their design. So they (i.e. the players, DBN) design something that the little world inside the computer reacts to. And then they have to revisit the design and redesign it, or tear it down and build another one, whatever it is. So I guess what really draws me to interactive entertainment and the thing that I try to keep focused on is enabling the creativity of the player" (Pearce, 2002).

This statement makes clear that some game developers actually design and develop games with user-created content as a mode of gameplay and are eager to encourage and support users who produce their own game content. This move is a huge success, about 90 percent of the available content of *The Sims* is user-created.⁹ Besides RTS games and The Sims there are many other examples of games and game genres that offer the possibility of producing modifications. The success of the Role Playing Game Neverwinter Nights (BioWare, 2002) is partly due to its user-created content¹⁰ (Marriot, 2003). The description of Neverwinter Nights on Gamespy.com puts it this way: "There are thousands of user-created modules available for download, giving *Neverwinter Nights* almost limitless playability."¹¹ Compared to the games mentioned here, the FPS mod community however, stands out in size, growth and popularity.

⁸ "Top Ten First Person Shooters" Gamespot.com. Available <http://www.gamespot.com/features/6091340/index.html>. Last visited 29-03-2004.

⁹ Herz, J.C. "Learning from The Sims" The Industry Standard March 26 2001.

¹⁰ See the Neverwinter Fault for user-created content of Neverwinter Nights at <http://nwwvault.ign.com/index2.shtml>.

¹¹ See "Neverwinter Nights" Gamespy.com. Available: <http://pc.gamespy.com/pc/neverwinter-nights/?ui=gamefinder>. Last visited 30-03-2004.

1.1 Methodology

On the basis of three texts (Konzack, 2002; Aarseth, 2003; Nieborg, 2003, 2004) I will outline an approach for a systematic analysis of a FPS game. Note that this method could be applied for games outside the FPS genre as well. This new model (Nieborg, 2004), mainly based on the method for computer game criticism by Lars Konzack (2002), is rather a systematic tool to produce a clear and concise analysis of a game, than a clear cut method. The model is fairly straightforward and is meant to put the various aspects of game analysis in place. The model (or system) is based on three interacting domains, being the domain of the production and publishing of a game, the domain of the game itself and the domain of the gamer, i.e. the reception of a game. All domains are equally important and the model of the three domains is a highly dynamic one, interesting questions lie in between these three interdependent domains. For the first domain, the development and publishing of a (FPS) game, I will mainly look at the characteristics of the software code (c.f. Konzack, 2003) or engine of a FPS game / mod, the roles, demographics and ethos within development teams, both commercial or non-commercial. The attitudes of a development team and publisher of a FPS game towards mods is an important factor of analysis. By looking at interviews, discursive elements on websites and fora and by looking at legal documents (e.g. EULA's or End User License Agreements of commercial games), these attitudes can be put into perspective. The platform, an element within the domain of the production, of all games and mods analysed in this paper, is the PC.

When analysing the domain of the game, Aarseth's (2003) remarks on the analysis of interactive texts are taken into account when applying my model and there will be implicit reference to his approach throughout this paper. Especially Aarseth's remarks about play and non-play analysis has its influence on the actual analysis of the games and mods analysed hereafter. Almost all games as well as mods analysed in this paper, both within the *Unreal Universe* and the *Battlefield Universe*, and the games in the last chapter have actually been played.¹² Regarding the commercial versions of FPS games, it is important to get a sense of the look and feel of the game, the themes, the audiovisual style and the playerbase. The actual online play analysis of a FPS game

¹² Although it is never possible to play games in all modes as extensively as I would like, I played them to such an extent that the questions raised by a certain game or mod can be answered. Of course not every game mentioned in this paper is played. Some mods, used for illustrative purposes were not played as well as some commercial games serving as an example. Play analysis of the games mentioned in the last chapter posed the most difficulties for reasons of availability but also their offensive content, which made them hard to come by.

like *Unreal Tournament 2004* (Epic Games, 2004) gives many insights as to how other gamers react to the gameplay and what makes this game distinctive from its mods. It is paramount to get a good look at all the domains of a mod. Many mods are far from completed and have a small player-base. It would be plain wrong analysing a mod solely by looking at its website and so disregarding its developers and recipients, the gamers.

The third domain of the FPS texts, the reception of a game by its audience, will be mainly done by non-play analysis by ways of discourse analyses of the community clusters surrounding commercial games and mods, reviewing interviews with game developers, modders and players, and the review of literature on games / simulations, participatory culture and the writings on ideology and games. As the architecture of this paper makes clear, I used the method outlined above to divide my argument in three sections. First the industry's reaching out to gamers and mod-makers will be examined. Secondly, several (popular) mods will be analysed to come up with a set of shared characteristics within the domain of game production. And finally there will be an analysis of several mods that appear to be ideological constructs. The nature and implications of these mods within the domains of production and reception will also be discussed. But first I will ground my analysis in theories on the relationship between gamers and game developers.

2. Participatory Culture and Co-Created Media & Games

"Games are certainly highly structured and yet they engender a sense of agency". This agency is *"demarcated by producers of the game"* in order to produce cybernetic feedback loops that moves players into a hybrid state of 'game play' subjectivity (Marshall, 2002). Following the line of thought of the British Cultural Studies (BCS), gamers could be seen as an active audience, giving the game text its own reading, and in opposition to Fiske's description of an active audience of television viewers¹³, gamers are able to interfere with the text by modifying it. All the pitfalls of the assumptions underlying the BCS go for games as texts as well. The reading of a text will in many instances still be the dominated one, the mere interaction with the text and a higher sense of agency should not be mistaken with some kind of power¹⁴ and the agency that gamers do have is structured in many ways, ranging from the structures of gendered

technologies within a domestic sphere¹⁵ till the development and distribution model of game developers and publishers. By producing additional game content, the agency of gamers goes beyond the mere interaction with the text itself. Gamers are able to change almost any aspect of gameplay of many FPS games and by doing so, taking their agency to another level, rivalling but also cooperating with the cultural industry.

The appropriation of media texts and the blurring distinction between reading and writing is a normal phenomenon, not limited by new media. The process of "poaching" media texts, the practice of actively reading a media text authorized by its producer, is described by Jenkins (1992). He shows that fans (e.g. fans of the television series *Star Trek*) take a primary media text, such as a television program, and rewrite it, talk about it, and in some cases bring the text back into circulation. The reader of a media text has become an (active) producer within a culture that allows and sustains these practices, i.e. a participatory culture. New media only simplify the production and distribution of user-created media texts. Media texts accessible by 'old' media, such as the television programs, cassette tapes and theatrical releases, could be 'modded' as well. Take the modification of a media text on a simple VCR tape. This process of modification and reproduction would have several technological limitations and distributing video tapes can be a costly endeavour. Re-editing a movie, without a PC, would require skill and the proper (i.e. expensive) material. The distribution of such a re-edited movie would be extremely difficult or nearly impossible compared to the scale of distribution of a FPS modification. In 2002 Jenkins took a new look at "the new participatory culture" and what he calls *"Interactive Audiences"*. He urges to *"document the interactions that occur amongst media consumers, between media consumers and media texts, and between media consumers and media producers"* and he signals the intersection between three trends:

- (1) *New tools and technologies enable consumers to archive, annotate, appropriate, and recirculate media content.*
- (2) *A range of subcultures promote Do-It-Yourself (DIY) media production, a discourse that shapes how consumers have deployed those technologies.*
- (3) *Economic trends favouring the horizontally integrated media conglomerates encourage the flow of images, ideas, and narratives across multiple media channels and demand more active modes of spectatorship.*

After looking at several practices of participatory culture within the FPS mod community, I will re-evaluate these three trends and will show whether or not these trends are true for the FPS mod community or need some redefinition, adjustment or

¹³ See Fiske, J. *Television culture*. London / New York : Methuen , 1987.

¹⁴ Or being powerful (c.f. "Morley, D. "Active audience theory: Pendulums and pitfalls." *Defining media studies. Reflection on the future of the field*. Ed. M.R. Levy and M. Gurevitch. New York/Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1994. 255-261.)

¹⁵ C.f. Morley, D. *Television audiences and cultural studies*. London / New York : Routledge, 1992.

enhancement. Especially the second trend holds true for the FPS mod community. Some redefinition of the notion of participatory culture as described by Jenkins (1992) is done by Morris (2003a). She argues that: *“while the concept of “participatory culture” is familiar from research into television fan communities (Jenkins, 1992), I would argue that multiplayer FPS games are “co-creative media”; neither developers nor player-creators can be solely responsible for production of the final assemblage regarded as “the game”, it requires the input of both.* In her view the hegemony of media producers decreases by gamers’ use of mod software and a new ethos of co-creating games arises. The notion of co-creation has resemblances with the open software movement (Stallman, 1999), characterised by co-creation, open source software¹⁶, but also cooperation and peer acknowledgment. Jenkins (2002) has put up an argument along the line of Morris when he quotes Levy (1997): *“The distinctions between authors and readers, producers and spectators, creators and interpretations will blend to form a reading-writing continuum, which will extend from the machine and network designers to the ultimate recipient, each helping to sustain the activities of the others.”* Producers of FPS games seem eager to create participatory communities where the consumer becomes co-creators. These *“emergent knowledge cultures”* however, *“never fully escape the influence of the commodity culture, any more than commodity culture can totally function outside the constraints of territoriality.”* Squire (2003) extends this notion of the interplay between the cultural industry and readers looks at how industries use the potential of their emerging fan-base and dubs this process *“participatory design.”*¹⁷ By letting gamers interact in both the development of a text and with the text itself, users are able to influence the text (i.e. a commercial game) in various ways. The question is, is this process of co-creating media and participatory design still participatory culture? On the one hand it is, user are still actively engaging with media texts out of free will and are eager to use (free) tools and software (engines). On the other hand the question is whether these participatory and collaborative elements within a mod culture are as bottom-up as some argue it to be. When this interactive culture is institutionalised, heavily commodified and becomes an artificial one or if one makes a mod just to break into the game industry, does this still qualifies as participatory culture or do we need redefinition of the existing topologies. Frasca (2000) claims that although games allow highly participative experiences, claiming that users become authors is: *“in general, far-fetched. (...) The videogame player could become a designer, by in fact, this activity is marginal in current videogames.”* I tend to disagree with Frasca that modding is a marginal activity. Looking at the ever

¹⁶ This does not mean free or gratis software. The source code needs to be freely available.

¹⁷ *“A design that involves representatives from all stakeholders in each phase of the design process. Ordinary users, who are ordinarily left out of the design process, can bring their expertise using products to the conversation, and help ensure more usable products. This ends up saving money for the designers, who can spend less energy in user/customer support. And, of course, this process results in more usable products, which benefits everyone.”*

growing mod-culture and the efforts of producers to encourage mod-developing, I would argue that the techniques, tools and knowledge for making mods becomes more available and used by the day. The question today is not so much the actual activity of producing custom content but distributing it. Here the notion of authorship is important insofar that modders have to “fight” for attention for their mod whereas commercial developers can use the marketing apparatus of their publisher.

This papers aims to show existing and emerging trends within the FPS mod culture¹⁸ and tries to give an extensive look into not only popular mods serving as pure entertainment, but also those mods that are there to shock, brand, offend, serve as art , serve as practice tool for murder and get across some sort of ideology. In short, mods that are out-of-the-box. But first I will discuss the characteristics of mods.

2.1 What makes a mod: an introduction

Gamers are known for their active attitude towards their (favourite) games/simulations. Single player FPS games can take from fifteen to forty hours to complete and multiplayer games can be played infinite, playtime is only limited by the time the gamer decides to play. A single single-player FPS can consume a substantial amount of time to complete, more so than movies, television shows, comic books and in some cases books. When a game does not meets the expectations of gamers, by not providing a compelling or a very short single-player campaign, both gamers and the game press will not hesitate to express this “con”¹⁹. Multi-player parts of FPS games never have this disadvantage for obvious reasons, although gamers tend to demand more playable content (e.g. maps) after a game is published. Gamers go at great length when it comes to actively endorse a game in as many ways possible.

¹⁸ After writing the first draft of this paper a colleague mailed me the paper of Sotamaa (2003). After reading this paper I was kind of shocked because he uses a similar theoretical framework compared to this paper. Authors such as Jenkins (1992, 2002) and Banks (2003) but also Aarseth’s (2003) methodological approach are surprisingly similar. Sotamaa also uses some similare examples. This said, I did two things. I did not use Sotamaa’s paper in any way to avoid any overlap and my already developed theoretical framework did not change. Second, although similar in theory, all my case studies are completely different making my paper just as valuable as Sotamaa’s. After the first shock, I see it as a compliment that I actually did the same research as a Finnish assistant-professor.

¹⁹ In many reviews there is a short “pro” and “con” list where the most striking advantages and disadvantages are noted. An example of a game with a short single-player campaign is Call of Duty (Infinity Ward, 2003), see Greg Bemis “Call of Duty (PC) Review” Techtv.com, available at <http://www.techtv.com/xplay/reviews/story/0,24330,3586552,00.html>, last visited 15 March 2004. Also Max Payne 2: The Fall of Max Payne is considered (too) short, which is a big disappointment for many gamers. See: Kosak, Dave “Fargo”. “Max Payne 2: The Fall of Max Payne (PC) Gamespy.com Available at: <http://www.gamespy.com/reviews/october03/maxpayne2pc/>, last visited 15 March 2004.

Gamers get involved in the game and the multi-player parts of many FPS are sites of fruitful social interaction. A preliminary study of the FPS America's Army: Special Forces (US Army, 2003) shows that a majority of the (online) players are motivated to play because they are able to communicate with their peers (Bouckaert, 2004). Game communities, social structures around a common interest (i.e. a game/simulation/mod), ranging from FPS games to Role-Playing Games (RPG's) have become very popular up to a point that there are international attempts to regulate the excessive presence in these community (Chee & Smith, 2003). There are gamers that develop websites, with various topics ranging from game-tactics to walkthroughs. Others host modifications or create fan-art, develop and distribute (third party) tools and maintain and set up game servers. Judging to the staggering numbers of topics and responses on fora of popular game-sites, the number of gamers participating in discussions shows the willingness of these gamers to interact with their peers (fellow-gamers) and in some cases even with game journalists and the developers of games. A considerable amount of gamers are able to tinker with almost every aspect of a game and do so in a highly sophisticated matter, resulting in playable user-created content, i.e. mods. An estimated percentage of modders is given by Au (2003):

"I'd wager somewhere around 5 to 10 percent of players have tinkered with the [editing] tools," says Cliff Bleszinski, lead designer for "Unreal." "While that doesn't sound like a lot, bear in mind that Unreal Tournament (1999), a multiplayer spin-off sold over 2 million copies. I'd estimate that nearly half of all 'UT' players have downloaded and played mods or levels for the game."

Before I give my view of what a mod is and why there is a need for a distinction between different forms of mods, I will trace back the origins of FPS mods by looking at the first FPS games, Castle Wolfenstein 3D (id Software, 1992) and DOOM (id Software, 1994), both developed by id Software, a game developer that had and still has an considerable influence on the origin and ethos of user created content and software development (c.f. Morris, 2003a). Every account on the come-about of the FPS mod community will start with the almost legendary tale (c.f. Kushner, 2003) of the developers of the first popular FPS's (DOOM and Castle Wolfenstein 3D) John McCarmack and John Romero, founders of id Software. Most important in this 'tale' are the decisions made at the time, mostly by programmer John McCarmack, who had an ethos that shows many resemblances with the open-source movement (c.f. Stallman, 1999). The decision to release the source code of DOOM (id Software, 1994) resulted in an immediate reaction of the community that had sprung up with the publishing of DOOM. The request to always make sure that the original game was needed to play a DOOM-mod was an important step that both

marked a new approach to the distribution and production (digital) media but also its appropriation by modders. Until today modders respect the fact that an original game is needed to play a mod, on the other hand game developers are more than willing, as analysis will show later on, to let modders toy with their software, for reasons of profit.

2.2 Am I Mod or Not?

Although both gamers and scholars do not have any trouble with the term 'mod' and share a common understanding what is or what is not a mod, the question whether a game is a mod or a "regular" (commercial) game is an arbitrary one. If one sees mods as the modification of an existing game²⁰ and uses this as a very strict definition of a mod (i.e. the adaptation of an existing game and / or engine), many games could actually be seen as mods. Software patches qualify not as mods, for they are mostly upgrades or bug fixes of games issued the developer. Because patches are meant to improve or slightly enhance games or mods the developers of a patch issue it with a different intent compared to mods. Cheats could be seen as mods, but they lie outside the scope of this paper and are not seen as mods. A cheat is a piece of software with the sole purpose of altering gameplay with the intent to disrupt other players' experience. Because the cost of building a solid up-to-date game engine²¹ from the ground up, many commercial game developers license an engine and adapt it to their needs. Focusing on the ethos, distribution and reception of modifications as opposed to the actual act of adaptation, results in a description of mods closer to the one used in scientific and journalistic discourses. Stallman describes free software "as the freedom to run a program for any purpose, to freely modify a program to suit your needs, to be able to freely distribute copies, either gratis or for a fee and to have the freedom to distribute modified versions of the program, so that the (opens source community, DBN) can benefit from your improvements." Many mods resemble the characteristics of open source software as described by Stallman. Most mods are, gratis, but in most cases the original (commercial) game is needed to run a mod. A demand made by the commercial game developers in order to ensure the purchase of an original game. Mods are also developed in order to suit needs of modders and their fans and have the freedom to distribute modified versions of the program. The most important feature of a mod, next to the obvious fact that it uses an existing game or engine, is, in my opinion, the facts that it is a product free of commercial interests and has an open source. This distinguishes the commercial game UT2003, from a mod like Red Orchestra for, e.g.

²⁰ Or the adding of new content on an existing (open source) game engine.

²¹ Wikipedia gives a useful definition of a game engine: "In computing, a game engine is the core software component of a computer game. It typically handles rendering and may handle additional tasks such as AI, collision detection between game objects, etc. The most common element that a game engine provides is graphics rendering facilities (2D or 3D)." See: http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Game_engine. Accessed 15 March 2004.

Desert Combat. Some mods, such as [Ethnic Cleansing](#), (National Alliance, 2002) and [Special Force](#) (Hizbullah Central Internet Bureau, 2003) both based upon the Genesis 3D open-source game engine are not gratis. But because their sole intent is not to make a profit but to convey “a message”, they still can be considered mods, also because they are solely based upon open-source technology. I would argue that when a developer pays a fee for licensing a game engine, the resulting product qualifies as a commercial game.

As analysis of several recent FPS games and mods will show, the game industry tries to limit the notion and definition of mods. Not so much by their demand to use the existing game to run a mod, but by limiting the freedom of use. Not everything is possible with a mod according to game developers, one can not make a mod of a commercial game that contains “*libellous, defamatory, or other illegal material or material that is scandalous or invades the rights of privacy or publicity of any third party, nor may mods contain copyright-protected work*”²². To cut a long story short, there are two main discursive elements when one looks at mods. One the definition of mods given shape by gamers and modders which resembles notions of the open-source movement of Stallman and a second definition of mods by “the game industry”²³, which tries regulate mod development and tries to protect business interests. Both definitions are ever changing and interactive. There is not one definition of a mod so a possible third scholarly or scientific definition would only confuse existing notions of mods and is therefore superfluous.

2.3 Sorts of mods

Mods are as diverse as there are computer games. They can differ in size and complexity and can make little adjustments to the original game or give it a total overhaul. Some mods are not even games anymore, but movies or simulations made with the use of a game-engine. Most mods for FPS games still are adjustment for multiplayer games. In this paragraph I will try to give a short but complete review (synopsis) of the sort of mods and their relation to the original game or engine. First I will give insight into the kinds of mods that are variations on FPS games. FPS games can be both singleplayer and multiplayer. The following examples apply to both.

The simplest mods for FPS games are maps, skins and audio changes. Maps, or levels, are the playground in which the virtual fight takes place. With the use, in the

²² End User License Agreement (EULA), Unreal Tournament 2004. Section 10. Point iii.

²³ Note that the distinctions made in this paragraph are mainly to get a clearer understanding of mods. There is of course no such thing as “the game industry”. I use the term here to describe developers of recent FPS games.

case of an Unreal game, of the [UnrealEd 3.0](#) editor²⁴, simple maps can be made with the use of existing 3D textures and static meshes²⁵, which can be found in folders of and installed game. As with all mods, mastering mod tools is fairly simple and making a map is not that hard, making a sophisticated, original or complex map on the other hand requires skill, knowledge and creativity. A skin is an image, produced with e.g. Adobe Photoshop or a digital camera, used to give a player's character (or avatar) a different texture. Custom made skins are an easy way to make an avatar distinct from other skins when playing online. On the other hand 3D objects, such as static meshes can also be ‘skinned’. Alongside developing maps and skins, players make their own weapons²⁶. Weapons need to be textured, similar to Skins, and can modeled and programmed in a way that differs from the original weapons, making them for instance more powerful. The audio of a game, and often neglected part of FPS games, can be modified as well. Modders create so called ‘sound-packs’ which can be used to replace the existing sounds of a map or level with custom made sounds. Users can for example create a “Simpson-soundpack”, where the weapon sounds and the announcer and avatar voices have a Simpson theme. Voice-packs are mods with only the voices of the ingame characters modified.

Mods not only are able to modify the lay-out of a game, but its gameplay by means of mutators or changing the gametype. Changing a gametype most often involves changing maps as well. Multiplayer games have several gametypes, the most common is simple deathmatch (free-for-all) or team-deathmatch, where the “objective” is just to kill all that moves. With the advent of more tactical FPS games such as [Counter Strike](#) (Minh "Gooseman" Le, 1999), FPS gameplay focused more on objectives, such as defusing a bomb, rescuing a hostage or capturing a flag. Objective based gametypes can differ in complexity and style. [Unreal Tournament 2003](#) (Epic Games, 2003) for instance features the *Bombing Run* gametype where gamers are divided into two teams trying to score points by putting a ball (or bomb) through a hoop, similar to a American Football game. Mutators adjust gameplay as well. These (tiny) software adjustments or tweaks change for example the speed, regeneration of items, or

²⁴ With this free editor modders use the same editor as the commercial game developers. UnrealEd 3.0 has a What-You-See-Is-What-You-Get interface. Simple adjustment in geometry, lighting and texturing can be made without using any line of code.

²⁵ Textures are the lay-out of objects, such as walls. A level is made up of simple geometry and than textured with a picture (texture) of e.g. a brick wall. Static meshes are 3D objects made with an external 3D package and can be imported to the level-editor.

²⁶ With the ever increasing complexity and possibilities, modders also begin to produce their own vehicles, not within the existing editors, but with the use of a 3D software packages and some computer code. Alongside this many other things are modifiable, such as the Karma physics or animations of e.g. bodies or moving objects. These kinds of modifications are often made by the more advanced or specialized modders.

gravity. A famous mutator is *'Instagib'*, this mutator first used in the FPS *Quake* (id Software, 1996) refers to so called *'gibs'*, slang for an exploding body. When the Instagib mutator is enabled, the gameplay changes to the “one-shot one-kill” principle, where users wield a powerful Shock Rifle. A mutator is server side software instead of client side, this makes joining a mutator enabled game server more easy.

The most drastic mods for FPS games are so called total conversions. A total conversion is a complete overhaul from an existing game. It changes, varying on the status of the mod²⁷, the theme of a game which results in a modification of (almost) all elements of a game. A science-fiction oriented FPS as *Unreal Tournament 2004* can be changed to a slower paced World War Two FPS. There are not that many single player total conversions for FPS games²⁸. This will be partly due to the complexity of programming and coding artificial intelligence and the lack of re-playability of single player games. The modding of multi-player games relies more on skills, tools and resources that are already available within the mod community. Developing a single player FPS mod would need a certain amount of dedication and expert knowledge in areas as games' narrative, and the coding and programming of artificial intelligence aspects of a game engine. This next to the fact that the original versions of many recent popular FPS games mostly are multi-player. One of the most well know multi-player total conversions is *Counter Strike* (Minh "Gooseman" Le, 1999).

Game mods are mostly made by individuals interested in modding “just for fun” or other social reasons outlined in the introduction. Artists, but also corporations²⁹, join the ranks of modders by making mods that use the power of 3D engines to create virtual environments or (digital) movies. These digital movies are known as *machinema* and some see it as “an emergent art form” (Marriot, 2003). The producers of *machinema* only use digital props for their computer-generated movies. An example of a virtual environment based on the Unreal engine is the *Virtual Reality Notre Dame*³⁰. This is an application that lets users wander (walk and fly) through a virtual

²⁷ Modders tend to release their mods even if their not finished. This often results in a blended feel where some parts of the game are original, e.g. its sound, while other parts, e.g. playerskins are already modified. Modders take advantage of these “alpha” (an unstable but useful product for demonstration purposes and to generate bug reports) and “beta” releases (games/mods published for testing purposes with most gameplay features enabled and functioning) to generate player feedback and build a fan base. Commercial game developers are able to use this luxury to a far lesser extent.

²⁸ See for an example of a single player mod (of *Unreal Tournament*) *Spatial Fear* (Liquid Element, 2002). Available: <http://dynamic5.gamespy.com/~lc/?pg=main>. Last visited 07-04-2004.

²⁹ Of course, game mods are also made by artists and to a lesser extent by corporations.

³⁰ See: <http://www.vrmdproject.com/>. Last visited 08-04-2004.

replica of the Notre-Dame of Paris Cathedral. It also enables users to chat with other visitors of the same virtual world and have a virtual tour guide. Although not considered mods, modders often feel the need for custom made software tools and scripts. As examples will show later on, the making of tools is a normal step for more experienced mod makers to raise the bar of their mod. In the next chapter I will show the current trends in the FPS game industry and the attitudes of the industry towards modders.

3. ComMODdification of mod-culture: The Industry is reaching out

As outlined in the chapter 2, the history of mods shows that the idea of gamers making mods is not so much a profit-motive so characteristic for the cultural industry, but an idea to let gamers make their own games/mods, in order to make better games and share alike. This ethos is still out there to be found in many mod communities, on the other hand game developers, and game publishers in particular, appropriate and institutionalize the mod community. It seems that in some cases manifestations of bottom-up acts of producing user-created game content are artificially created in order to fit the needs of game publishers and developers, i.e. to make money.

This profit to be gained by letting users become co-creators has several motives that all can be tracked back to the main reason of making profit. According to Herz (2002): “... *even if only 1 percent* (of all the gamers playing a particular moddable game, DBN) *contributes to the innovation in the product, even if they are making only minor, incremental improvements or subtle tweaks, that's 10,000 (unpaid) people in research and development.* This call for, “*harnessing the hive*”, as Herz likes to call it, makes clear that enabling users become producers downsizes the costs of R&D (Research & Development). A similar claim is made by McGonigal (2003) when she shows what amount of influence an online community can harness, influence based on collective knowledge and resulting in collective action. An investment of time and money in R&D is at the basis of developing many, if not all, FPS's. As gamers demand more sophisticated and original games, developers are almost obliged to come up with technical advancements every time they put out a new (FPS) game. As Pearce (2001) notes: “*Each game must be more challenging and 'smarter' than the last. Therefore, the game designer is always engaged in a battle of wits with the player, even from the inception of a new game concept, a sequel, or even a new game level.* Here Pearce notes both the participatory design principle of Squire (2003) and the demand for improvement. According to Herz it is “*from a business perspective (sic)*”, important that a game company has the ability “*not only to cultivate this elite unpaid R&D community, but also to capture the best mutations of its product for direct commercial gain and not alienate the player community by doing so.*” As I will argue

hereafter by showing the characteristics of what I call *The Unreal Universe*, the approach of looking for direct commercial gain and not alienating the mod-community is not a hard to reach objective. Gamers are more than willing to make mods, not so much to help game companies, but for reasons outlined in the beginning of this paper.

3.1 The Unreal Universe³¹

The *Unreal Universe* consists of several clusters of communities, both virtual and physical. These communities are then centred on the Unreal Engine powered games. These games have their own clusters of communities, ranging from game-sites to fan-sites to websites that run tournaments of Unreal games. There are several clusters of communities centred on the Unreal engine itself. Some of these communities offer free tutorials, publish news about the engine, belong to the official developers of the engine or are part of a larger community of mod-makers. It is interesting to see the immense amount of recourses and information mod-makers have created in order to sustain the community and supply their fellow-mod-makers with the right tools to make mods on their own. An example of the free-for-all spirit of the mod community is Unreal Engine section on the open-source encyclopaedia Wikipedia³². The FPS game *Unreal* (Digital Extremes, 1998) is the first in a series of more than ten FPS games, made for the PC³³, Mac³⁴, the Xbox³⁵ and the Playstation 2³⁶ that carry the Unreal brand. The work on this first title started in 1994 and resulted in 1998 in, what the official Unreal site³⁷ summarizes in:

“defining the leading edge of 3D technology, introducing to the first person shooter (FPS) genre such new features as fully dynamic lighting, volumetric and atmospheric lighting,

³¹ The name “*Unreal Universe*” is made up by the publisher and developer of the series. See: <http://www.unreal.com/>. Last visited 04-04-2004.

³² See: See for the Unreal Engine part of Wiki: <http://wiki.beyondunreal.com/wiki/>. Last visited 05-04-2004. The homepage is very clear about its ethos of contributing: “*The Unreal Wiki is an open, collaborative site, aiming to gather reference, tutorials and ideas for the Unreal engine. It is written by a large number of mappers, coders and modellers. Everybody is invited to contribute; everybody is an editor – including you!*”

³³ *Unreal*, *Unreal II*, *Unreal Tournament*, *Unreal Tournament 2003* and *Unreal Tournament 2004* are developed for the PC.

³⁴ *Unreal Tournament 2003* and *Unreal Tournament 2004*.

³⁵ *Unreal Championship*, *Unreal Championship 2: The Liandri Conflict* (forthcoming) and *Unreal II: The Awakening*.

³⁶ *Unreal Tournament*.

³⁷ See “UT History” [Unrealtournament.com](http://www.unrealtournament.com/). Available: <http://www.unrealtournament.com/general/history.php>. Last visited 04-04-2004.

what-you-see-is-what-you-get development tools, a next-generation scripting language, and extraordinary customizability.”

A year and a half later, Epic Games came out with *Unreal Tournament* (Digital Extremes, 1999) an enhanced version of *Unreal* with more game modes and better network capabilities. According to the authors of the Top Ten of First Person Shooters the success of *Unreal Tournament* was mainly due to the mods and mutators³⁸ available for the games.

*The mutator format made it easy to package and distribute minor gameplay tweaks, such as instagib game types or low-gravity settings. (...) UT's mod scene also provided a decent selection of free content, such as the popular Tactical Ops mod, which aped the massively popular Counter-Strike but with UT's much better graphics under the hood. If anyone needs further proof of UT's greatness, there's the simple fact that there are still thousands of people playing the core game every day, not just the most popular mods.”*³⁹

Maybe the asset that was the origin of the success of the Unreal franchise is the use, possibilities and distribution of the Unreal Engine⁴⁰. The first appearance of the of the Unreal Engine had the engine build that ends around 440⁴¹. UT2003 had the normal Unreal engine build 2225 and the last build is build 3120, used for the UT2004 beta demo. This example shows the quick growth of a commercial game engine, something that hampers the analysis of games by scholars, but also the development by the licensors of the Unreal Engine. It also shows that games are more and more based on existing technologies and commercial game engines, which makes them, on a theoretical level, mods. The heart of every FPS and an essential part of the games' program code is the game engine. A game engine, an element somewhat similar to Konzack's layer 'Program Code' is an important element of every game: “*Every computer game depends on code. Therefore program code is essential to the understanding of computer games*” (Konzack, 2002). The game engine influences a FPS game on all elements within the domain of a game, ranging from the audiovisuals till the gameplay, and is deterministic for its use. Since the birth of FPS's the emphasis on the development of different (game) engines has been enormous. Because of the

³⁸ See chapter 2.3 for a definition of mutators.

³⁹ “Top Ten First Person Shooters” [Gamespot.com](http://www.gamespot.com/). Available: <http://www.gamespot.com/features/6091340/p-5.html> Last visited 15 March 2004.

⁴⁰ The Unreal Engine is also known as the Unreal II Engine, the UT2003 Engine, the Unreal Warfare Engine, the Unreal Championship Engine or the Unreal Tournament Engine or UE2. Note that the Unreal Engine is an ever evolving piece of software and there is no such thing as *the* Unreal Engine. The build of an engine is annotated with a (build) number, e.g. *Unreal Tournament 2004* build 3345.

⁴¹ Every Unreal Engine has a build number and shows which build is used.

huge costs of developing a unique game engine, many FPS's are based on a third-party engine. Games as Postal 2 (Running with Scissors, 2003), America's Army: Special Forces (US Army 2002) and Tom Clancy's Splinter Cell (Ubisoft Montreal, 2002) are based on the latest Unreal Engine (technology). Epic games, the developer of the Unreal Engine, "views its technology licensing partners (c.f. the developers mentioned above) as strategic and long-term part of the company's strategy."⁴² Adding certain features to a game, ranging from a non-conventional visual style, in the case of XIII (Ubisoft, 2003) or the emphasis on lighting and shadowing, in the case of Tom Clancy's Splinter Cell (Ubisoft Montreal, 2002) can result in fairly different games, while using the same engine.⁴³ The success of the Unreal franchise can (partly) be explained from the mindset of the first developers of the first Unreal game, regarding mods and the use of the Unreal engine.

"Many in Unreal's team were recruited from the Doom and Quake modding cooperatives, (...). Code-wise, Sweeney developed the level editor right on top of the game's 3-D engine so that they were integrated. It helped make the editor customizable in a way that previous utilities had not been. Another innovation was what Sweeney called UnrealScript, which enabled modders to easily redefine AI and other game elements" (Au, 2003).

In an interview with a popular game news website, Cliff Bleszinski, Lead-Designer on the development team of UT2004, said the following about the latest instalment in the Unreal PC-series Unreal Tournament 2004 (Epic Games, 2004):

*"GameSpy: There are a lot of FPS games shipping in March. What does UT2004 do that the other games don't? What makes UT2004 so unique?
Cliffy B: UT2004 is not just a game, it's a platform. By purchasing this (reasonably priced) game you're going to not only have access to one of the deepest game "toyboxes" ever, you're going to unlock a gateway to hundreds of great user-made mods and thousands more user-created levels. We've only scratched the surface here, and with events such as the \$1,000,000 NVIDIA Make Something Unreal Contest, the future is even brighter"* (Bowen, 2004).

Here Bleszinski mentions two of the most visible actions of the developers of to encourage mod-makers. The publishing of the Special Edition (SE) DVD of UT2004

⁴² "Company Information" [Epicgames.com](http://unreal.epicgames.com/Company.htm). Available: <http://unreal.epicgames.com/Company.htm>. Last visited: 04-04-2004.

⁴³ Parts of this paragraph are taken from unpublished article on game analysis methodology (Nieborg, 2004), note that this paper is free-lance article and from a paper, "Towards an academic method for analysing First Person Shooters", written for the course *New Tendencies in Digital Media: Games Research*.

and the *Make Something Unreal* contest. These two efforts can be seen as the culmination of what Morris (2003a) would label "co-creative media", gamer developers make sure there is an interdependent relationship between gamers and developers. On the other hand it is an act of creating a form "participatory design". Mod makers get the sense that they are actively involved in creating new content. By putting up highly visible and recognizable persons and developers as Bleszinski⁴⁴, game developers create "a sense of affiliation" (Jenkins, 2002) gamers feel towards 'their' games. "The Industry" creates a face in the form of young game developers recruited from the mod community. The game industry, known for its transparency and interaction on every level with gamers, harness this kind of bonding by putting up highly visible icons such as Bleszinski, who has his own website⁴⁵ that seeks out user-made maps for Unreal Tournament 2003 and Unreal Tournament 2004.

Another way to stimulate mod-making is the *Unreal University*. The title University is somewhat misleading. In November 2003 at the North Carolina State University in Raleigh, North Carolina, USA,⁴⁶ there was a two-day tutorial covering techniques for creating mods for the Unreal Tournament 2004 game engine. At this meeting 200 mod-makers, game designers, programmers and artists working on mods for Epic Games' UT 2004 met. The event was of course co-sponsored by Epic Games but also by one of the two biggest video card manufacturers, NVIDIA. The ever increasing demand for better 3D rendering technology plays direct into the hands of the manufacturers of sophisticated 3D technologies. An mod stimulating initiative also sponsored by NVIDIA is the "\$1,000,000 NVIDIA Make Something Unreal Contest". There is one million dollar to win in this mod making contest, consisting of four phases, each divided into several categories such as best tool, best map and best total conversion. All submissions must be in compliance with the Unreal Tournament End User License Agreement⁴⁷ of Unreal Tournament 2004 which means that each submission must be the property and an original work of the entrant, it also must be

⁴⁴ Marriot (2003) quotes Bleszinski and says something about his appearance: "This is one of the very few entertainment mediums in which you see this kind of organic process happen," said Mr. Bleszinski, whose highlight-streaked, tossed blond hair gives him a skater-boy aura. "I think this industry is really kind of grounded a lot closer to its fans, to its roots, than a lot other businesses." Perhaps, he continued, it is because "we all started as fans of this business and we respect our fans, the people who modify our games and make mods."

⁴⁵ Tired of downloading map after map for UT2003, searching for the one that will kick your ass and make you love every minute of it? Welcome to 0wnage, baby. Let CliffyB, lead designer for Epic Games, and co-creator of the Unreal series, do the searching. You won't find any crap here, just the cream of the crop from the Unreal Community. Available: <http://www.planetunreal.com/cliffy/b/>. Last visited: 08-04-2004.

⁴⁶ "Unreal University 2003" Available: <http://cde.ncsu.edu/uu2003/>. Last visited 08-04-2004.

⁴⁷ See: http://www.unrealtournament.com/ut2003/contest_legal.php. Last visited 08-04-2004.

available for free public download and playable with the retail version of Unreal Tournament 2003, or in phases three and four with Unreal Tournament 2004. There are many more map/mod making contests by other game developers and publishers, such as the Call of Duty (Infinity Ward, 2003) Mapmaking Competition. Here contestants will not be able to own of their self-created content⁴⁸ and the prize money is considerable less than the Unreal contest. It is clear that many developers of FPS games use contest mechanisms to stimulate new content creation. Some developers choose to use this user-created content directly in a add-on or an official map-pack, as in the case of Call of Duty. Others make them available as free downloads and let users retain their own copyright and ownership, in the case of the Unreal contest.

Although the Unreal Engine would to some looks like an open source engine to some, it is certainly not. The engine is free for personal, non-commercial and educational use only⁴⁹, which means that development of (commercial) games for distribution is not permitted.⁵⁰ There is a chance that the UE2 will become *the* dominating software package. Modders get hooked up, or only gain knowledge about the Unreal Editing software. The Unreal technology can become as pervasive as the Microsoft monopoly with its positive and negative consequences. The open-source ethos and bottom-up approach of making mods and thereby affecting the hegemony of mass-media in producing media texts, is after its initial start becoming a culture that is still mainly bottom-up, but also a culture that is, for reasons of profit, supported and directed in certain directions. The fact that gamers are willing to let this happen is understandable, many (commercial) developers nowadays are recruited from the mod-community and mod-developers still have the opportunity to practically do what they please (looked at the theme and content of mods), as will be showed in chapter 5. By looking at the *Unreal Universe* and some other smaller initiatives to “*harness to hive*” I want to show the game industry’s reaching out to the

⁴⁸ See point 2 in the Map Regulations and Technical Requirements: “*All entries become the exclusive property of the Sponsor and cannot be distributed in any manner*”. Pop-up available at: http://www.activision.com/microsite/cod_sweeps/. Last visited 08-08-2004.

⁴⁹ See the End Users License Agreement (EULA) at: <http://udn.epicgames.com/Powered/UnrealEngine2RuntimeEULA>. Last visited: 04-04-2004.

⁵⁰ The EULA is very explicit about this when it states (in capitals): “*YOU MAY NOT USE THE RUNTIME SOFTWARE TO DEVELOP GAMES FOR RELEASE VIA ANY MEANS TO ANY FORM OF END-USER. YES, I KNOW THIS SOUNDS NASTY BUT LET’S FACE IT, EPIC’S PRIMARY MEANS OF INCOME COMES FROM GAME SALES AND ENGINE LICENSING. WE WOULD BE SHOOTING OURSELVES IN THE FOOT IF WE ALLOWED AN ENGINE WE GAVE AWAY FOR FREE TO TRAMPLE OUR PRIMARY MEANS OF INCOME. SORRY, BUT IF YOU WANT TO DEVELOP AND RELEASE A GAME PLEASE DEVELOP IT AS A MOD FOR ONE OF OUR EXISTING RETAIL GAME PRODUCTS OR CONTACT US REGARDING A PROPER ENGINE LICENSE. (...)*”

mod-community and also its commodification. Au (2002) eloquently puts *his* fear into words when he says:

“What happens when modders begin paying to download and make what they once built and traded with each other just for the community spirit and the pure love of creating? It’s kind of frightening,” he says, “but the popularity of mods could spell the eventual doom of freeware levels and modifications.”What follows next depends on the ambitions of the modders and the wisdom of the game publishers. Cannibalism -- modder energy consumed by the gaming industry -- is one possibility.

4. The Battlefield Universe: looking for trends within a mod-community

The Battlefield Universe⁵¹ consists of the first game in the Battlefield series, Battlefield 1942 (Digital Illusions CE, 2002), together with its two expansion packs, Battlefield 1942: The Road to Rome (Digital Illusion, 2003) and Battlefield 1942: Secret Weapons of World War II (Digital Illusion, 2003). These three FPS games have a World War 2 theme and can be played in both single- and multiplayer mode. The single player mode of Battlefield 1942 is known for its lousy artificial intelligence and lacks serious gameplay. The multiplayer part on the other hand made the game an instant hit⁵² by successfully introducing vehicular combat. The *Battlefield Universe* was recently supplemented by the Battlefield Vietnam (Digital Illusions, 2004), a FPS very similar to the previous Battlefield games, with some small adjustment and a different theme and theatre of war, the Vietnam conflict of the 60’s/70’s. Battlefield could be seen as an influential game when looked at the domain of the game and the very active and productive mod-community. This makes the *Battlefield Universe* an excellent object of research when looking for trends in FPS mod-community and thus the implications of user-created content.

Just as many other FPS games, the developers of Battlefield have their own free mod-tools. Made by modders and institutionalised by both the developer and publisher of Battlefield, there is an Mod Development Toolkit⁵³ (MDT), including all tools to edit Battlefield 1942 and Battlefield Vietnam. On the other hand there is Battlecraft42, the official map creation tool that allows modders to develop custom Battlefield maps. When asked if the reason for the distribution of the latest MDK was to pay more attention to the mod community, the founder of Trauma Studios, developer of both

⁵¹ The developer and publisher of the FPS Battlefield 1942 (Digital Illusions CE, 2002) do not speak of their franchise as the Battlefield Universe, I do so because the franchise consists of different elements, similar to the Unreal Universe.

⁵² Battlefield 1942 is also in the “Top Ten First Person Shooters” Gamespot.com. Available: <http://www.gamespot.com/features/6091340/p-2.html>. Last visited 15 March 2004.

⁵³ See <http://www.planetbattlefield.com/MDT/>. Last visited 05-04-2004.

the most popular Battlefield mod Desert Combat (Trauma Studios, 2003) says: “*Most definitely, EA and DICE both realize the impact that mod community makes as to extending the shelf life of a game. The Mod Development Toolkit was actually developed by Trauma Studios to help this effort along.*”⁵⁴ BF mods show that there is an almost unlimited choice in both mods and their themes. If gamers do not like the World War 2 theme of the original game, they simply recruit people that have a shared interest in a particular war/conflict or theme and make a mod of their own. An example of a Battlefield mod is The Lost Battalion⁵⁵ (Lost Battalion mod team, 2004), a mod that puts emphasis on the role of Australian troops in World War 2 and the battle against the Imperial Japanese forces in the Pacific Theatre of Operations. This example shows the need for localisation of a game. Dutch gamers can, if they like, make a mod of the battles of the Dutch Royal Army during the first days of World War 2, although it would be a very uninteresting and short experience⁵⁶. Another (humorous) example of a localised Battlefield mod is Silent Heroes⁵⁷ (Team Silent Heroes, 2003) where you can fight as Swedish allied forces invading Norway. Making a mod of something familiar such as a map of one’s living room or street is common practice for starting mod-makers. The Lost Battalion shows that small groups of mod makers can do what big publishers and developers can not do, make a product or game that is targeted for a relative small audience of interested gamers. Two other mods, Black Hawk Down Mod⁵⁸ (BHDmod Staff, 2004) and Conflict in Somalia⁵⁹ (CIS Staff, 2004) are based on the US led United Nations Operation “Restore Hope” in 1992. These mods show the kind of intertextuality (c.f. Marshall, 2002) at work in a mod-community. Game developers and publisher Novalogic also made a commercial game, Delta Force: Black Hawk Down (Novalogic, 2003) based on Mark Bowden’s book Black Hawk Down (Bowden, 2002) and Ridley Scott’s movie Black Hawk Down. The modders of the BHDmod team say about the Novalogic game: “*Well the game Novalogic has out is very fun to play, but we want to make it more interactive. For example: in Novalogic’s bhd (Black Hawk Down) game you can’t fly the chopper’s or drive the humvee’s. So we thought that the refractor2 engine (the engine of Battlefield Vietnam, DBN) is a great engine for this mod!*”⁶⁰ This quote again makes clear that mod makers are eager to put

⁵⁴ <http://www.homelanfed.com/index.php?id=22011>

⁵⁵ See: <http://tb.ausbattlefield.com/>. Last visited 05-04-2004.

⁵⁶ A few days after writing this I came across a mod for Call of Duty (Infinity Ward, 2003). The mod called Call of Duty: Operation Market Garden (Benelux Development Team, forthcoming) is a mod solely made by Dutch and Belgian modders based on a World War 2 operation in occupied Holland. See <http://www.bdt-team.net/index.php> for more info. Last visited 08-04-2004.

⁵⁷ See: <http://www.silentheroes.se/story.php>. Last visited 08-04-2004.

⁵⁸ See: <http://www.bhdmod.com/index.php?act=Main>. Last visited 05-04-2004.

⁵⁹ See: <http://www.cismod.com/>. Last visited 05-04-2004.

⁶⁰ “Frequently Asked Questions” BHDmod.com. Available: <http://www.bhdmod.com/index.php?act=Intel&page=FAQ> Last visited 05-04-2004.

their creative energy at work in order to produce a mod that meets *their* standards and their definition of a fun game, an ethos that is noticed and stimulated by the game industry and the developers of Battlefield Vietnam. In an interview the lead producer of Battlefield Vietnam stresses the importance of a community for the *Battlefield Universe*. “*we totally recognize that the community is THE main reason for the success of Battlefield as a franchise. We appreciate all their help and feedback.*”⁶¹ While these examples show the positive and a seemingly friction free view on the Battlefield mod-community, there are implications of mod-making when one looks at copyright and Intellectual Property issues.

4.1 Battlefield: IP

It sounds like a great Battlefield mod, Battlefield Intellectual Property (IP). You would have two parties, the ‘mod-makers’ and ‘the game industry’. The trouble with most multiplayer online games are balancing issues, if the mod-makers would have a tank that is much stronger than the tank of ‘the game industry’, and ‘the game industry’ does not have a proper anti-tank weapon, the game becomes unbalanced and would result in a dull game to play. Very small adjustments to weapons in FPS multiplayer games can tip off the balance in favour of one of the fighting parties and balancing gameplay is one of the most important occupations during playtest sessions held before the game ships. As games become more and more intertextual and mods have become true “intertextual commodities” (Marshall, 2002) the idea of an IP battlefield is not that imaginative as it would seem. The freedom given to modders is almost infinite and as I will show later on in this chapter, modders put this freedom to the test on a regular basis. The balance of power has to be even when it comes to IP rights. If not, the mod-community can turn their collective power against those who want to uphold stringent IP laws and turn to those who choose otherwise. Not all frictions derive from IP and copyright conflicts. As a descriptive analysis of four battlefield mods will show, the mere using of a theme (e.g. a Gulf War themed-mod) can have huge implications for those in the game industry developing a game with a similar theme. By letting users not only freely produce what they want, but by also endorsing and stimulating mod-making, as the developers of the *Battlefield* and the *Unreal Universe* do, developers give their implicit “go” when it comes to developing mods with similar themes. One of the main questions underlying this debate is uttered by Jenkins (2002): “*How far will media companies be willing to go to remain in charge of their content or to surf the information flow?*”. The seriousness of this debate is expressed by a range of articles and conferences such as the State of Play conference at the Yale

⁶¹ “Battlefield Newsletter” EA.com. March 2004.

http://www.eagames.com/official/battlefield/vietnam/us/editorial.jsp?sssdmh=dm24.51881&src=mar_bfv_newsletter_02. Last visited 08-04-2004.

Law School in New York⁶². By looking at different FPS mods and games, it seems that the attitude of the game industry is less stringent as one would think.

The tension between corporate ownership in virtual worlds, mostly massive multiplayer online Role Playing Games, and gamers is described by Taylor (2002). She makes an interesting point when she says: *"While it is common (and easy) to dismiss spaces like EQ (the RPG Everquest, Verant Interactive, 1999) as simply a game, this kind of reduction overlooks the thornier problems that arise when culture, communities, and commerce intersect."* The same goes for the modding and playing of FPS games. For many gamers, playing and modding is more than a simple game. Taylor calls for a redefinition of "current property regimes", regimes that are "historically mediated". IP and copyrights are there to protect both companies and consumers but above all "promotion of culture". Banks (2003) shows that participatory culture is a process of negotiation and even game developers, who do not wield very stringent IP rights, can have an impossible relation with its costumers, i.e. gamers and modders. He sums up his point when he points out that: *"this excessive, almost perverse enjoyment in the reconfiguration of the boundaries and relations between producer and consumer, the fun of playing in the networks of informational capitalism, is a constitutive condition that outgrows and eludes the controlling grasp."* It seems that it takes a certain amount of trust and courage for developers and publishers to loosen the grasp on their participant-designers. Thus far game developers have come up with a working model of the status of user-created content. The EULA of the Unreal Engine makes it clear that one can toy with the Unreal Engine in any way. The tone of the EULA, asking gamers to respect the corporate side of gamer developers⁶³, is in line with the "ethos of new media"

⁶² I visited this conference (November 13-15 2003, see <http://www.nyls.edu/pages/777.asp>) where 250 designers, computer scientists, entrepreneurs and legal scholars joined together to explore the phenomenon of virtual worlds and videogames. The conference dealt mostly with Massive Multiplayer Online Role-Playing-Games (MMO RPG's) and as a result of several discussions at this conference, the developers of the MMO game *Second Life* (Linden Lab, 2003) allowed players to retain in-game IP. See: "The State of Play: Second Life Allows Players to Retain In-Game IP" *LawMeme* 14 November 2003. Available at: <http://research.yale.edu/lawmeme/modules.php?name=News&file=article&sid=1277> last visited 30-03-2004 and "Second Life Digital IP Rights" *Gameshark.com*. 11 November 2003. Available at: <http://www.gameshark.com/pcgaming/articles/440512p1.html>. Last visited 30-03-2004.

⁶³ Here is an example of the EULA of UT2004, section 1: *"Congratulations and thank you for licensing our software. We're sorry to cramp your style, but our lawyers tell us that if we want to keep control and ownership of the cool stuff we're developing, we have to make sure you understand and agree that you are just buying a right to use it and that that right is limited in certain ways"* and section 12; *"12. Enjoyment Requirements. We are aware that there are rumblings and grumblings within the gaming community about heavy handed, legally onerous license agreements. You have our word that this one is as fair and even handed as it gets and, as you have read this far, you know it to be true. Now, be gone from this screen and enjoy the Software, including the UnrealEd."*

(Thomas, 2002). He argues that because of the digital appearance of new media, and thus reproducibility of code, producers of digital content not so much rely on the logic of originality, but on the notion of authority. Gamers are encouraged to make use of existing IP in the case of making mods for the Unreal contest. There is even a price for a map that repurposed original content in the most creative way.⁶⁴ This seems like the right approach, letting gamers, but also educational institutions, benefit from advanced 3D software for reasons of play, innovation and education, as long as they make their product dependent on the original software and free of charge⁶⁵. The approach of Unreal to be very open about their intents differs somewhat from other game designers.⁶⁶ Some publishers choose to directly own all the material made by gamers at the time of their choosing. Next to this, there are problems regarding appropriation of existing IP. In the following paragraphs I will discuss some more Battlefield mods to show relevance and actuality of the IP discussion.

4.2 Battlefield mods and original IP

The discourse in many FPS games has a strong intertextual character and references to popular culture, e.g. Southpark, the Simpsons and the movie Forrest Gump, are more than common. Gamers "re-fashion the resources of popular culture for their own expressive discourse purposes" (Wright et. al. 2002). Just as gamer use quotes from their favourite TV-series or movies, they use existing IP to serve as inspiration for a mod. The modders of the *GI Joe Mod*⁶⁷ stumbled upon the boundaries of using existing IP. Lawyers of the *Hasbro Corporation*, a toy manufacturer and owner of the GI Joe⁶⁸ IP, had contacted the mod team and issued a cease and desist letter. The modders show their regrets of not being permitted to use the GI Joe theme to make

⁶⁴ See http://www.unrealtournament.com/ut2003/contest_categories.php and http://www.unrealtournament.com/ut2003/contest_categories.php#Best%20Level%20Using%20Original%20Conten. Last visited 05-04-2004.

⁶⁵ The EULA of UT2004, section 10, point I, explicitly states that: *"Your Mods must only work with the full, registered copy of the Software, not independently or with any other software."* Point 5 of section 10 states: *"Your Mods must be distributed solely for free, period. Neither you, nor any other person or party, may sell them to anyone, commercially exploit them in any way, or charge anyone for receiving or using them without prior written consent from Epic Games Inc. You may exchange them at no charge among other end-users and distribute them to others over the Internet, on magazine cover disks, or otherwise for free."*

⁶⁶ C.f. the text in the Software License Agreement of *Call of Duty* (Infinity Ward, 2003): *"All New Game Materials created by you shall be exclusively owned by Activision and/or its licensors as a derivative work (as such term is described under U.S. copyright law) of the Program and Activision and its licensors may use any New Game Materials made publicly available by you for any purpose whatsoever, including but not limited to, for purpose of advertising and promoting the Program."*

⁶⁷ See: <http://www.planetbattlefield.com/gi/>. Last visited 05-04-2004.

⁶⁸ GI Joe is a American military themed cartoon and toy-series. See <http://www.hasbro.com/gijoe/default.cfm>. Last visited 05-04-2004.

a Battlefield mod, but are hard-pressed to move on. The motives of Hasbro corp. for stopping the mod are still unknown. It can be a simple matter of principle, “it is our IP, so we decide what to do with it”, it may be fear (of the unknown). By letting a group of modders interact with a text and giving it their reading, the final product can not be in line with the intentions of a manufacturer of (children) toys. On the other hand, the GI Joe mod could have become an instant hit, renewing the need for GI Joe toys. Fortunately modders are reluctant and creative enough to come up with original IP. As the mods Silent Heroes and The Lost Battalion show, modders are not afraid to develop localised and/or innovative mods for a small audience. As Au (2003) remarks: “*mods can come up with new gameplay elements that the industry is too conservative to implement, or non-creative to come up with.*” Two interesting examples of Battlefield mods with an original theme are Siege⁶⁹ (Siege mod team, 2003) and Battlefield Pirates (Scurvy Cove Productions, 2003). Siege is a medieval based modification, complete with horses, castles, swords and catapults. As the website notes “*Siege tries to fill the largely untouched medieval age mod category.*” Battlefield Pirates on the other hand focuses on battles between two groups of Pirates (the Blue Pirates and the Red Pirates). The mod is fairly detailed with different ships, custom voices (“*arrrrrrrrrr, matey!*”) adjusted weapons and of course avatars with Pirate Skins!

A Battlefield mod that uses existing IP is Star Wars-oriented mod Battlefield Galactic Conquest (Galactic Conquest mod team, 2003). This mod is remarkable in two ways. It uses the copyrighted material from Lucas Arts, the owner of Star Wars IP. Many elements of the mod, its avatars, music and vehicles are directly copied from the Star Wars saga. Galactic Conquest⁷⁰ is not the only FPS using the Star Wars IP, see for example UT2003 Troopers: Dawn of Destiny⁷¹ (UT2003 Troopers mod team, 2003). This Unreal Tournament 2003 mod has a similar approach as Galactic Conquest. In an interview about the reaction of LucasArts to their mod the developers of Dawn of Destiny say:

*“Considering the fact that we're running with the Star Wars intellectual property, something that is very much theirs, and we're doing it completely outside their company, they've been fantastic. Very encouraging and undeniably supportive of our progress.”*⁷²

⁶⁹ See: <http://www.planetbattlefield.com/siege/> Last visited 05-04-2004.

⁷⁰ See: <http://www.galactic-conquest.net/> Last visited 05-04-2004.

⁷¹ See: <http://www.ut2003troopers.com/> Last visited 05-04-2004.

⁷² JeDiDrAko. “Troopers: Dawn of Destiny Interview” 2003. [unrealxtreme.de](http://unrealxtreme.ngz-network.de/mygamesite/mgs/pages/uxbase/index.php?mod=article&action=articlecomplete&showid=94). Available: <http://unrealxtreme.ngz-network.de/mygamesite/mgs/pages/uxbase/index.php?mod=article&action=articlecomplete&showid=94>. Last visited 05-04-2004.

What makes this approach of LucasArts remarkable, is the announcement of their own (official) FPS title Star Wars: Battlefront (LucasArts, forthcoming). In a preview in Edge (Edge, 2004) a reviewer directly compares the two FPS games, and even goes as far to look at the Battlefield mod to get the sense what Star Wars: Battlefront is about, because of the lack of a preview copy of the game. The article also mentions the change in policy of LucasArts towards their IP in order “*to take advantage of the rabid following that's grown up around the under-resourced and under-achieving mod with its own take on Battlefield 1942*”, arguing that a mod as Galactic Conquest would not have been permitted two years ago. This policy shift is clearly for reasons of profit. If the Battlefield mod fails, LucasArts can learn from its mistakes, if the mod is a success, LucasArts is free to incorporate every aspect of the mod and enhance and improve it. In the long run the Battlefield mod will, with the words of Edge “*pale into significance*”. A ironic side note worth mentioning is the naming of a Star Wars Battlefront game mode, named “Galactic Conquest”:

*“But perhaps more interesting than the graphics is the “metagame” driving Star Wars: Battlefront. Tentatively called “Galactic Conquest,” this mode will throw players into a full-scale war.”*⁷³

A Battlefield mod that uses a contemporary theme is Eve of Destruction (EoD team, 2003). This mod does not rival with a toy maker or a game company, it rivals with the company on which the mod is based. Both Eve of Destruction and the recent Battlefield Vietnam are based on the Vietnam War, which “*puts Battlefield: Vietnam in the unusual position of competing with its predecessor.*”⁷⁴ The team has the following to say about their position on their homepage:

*“With the release of Battlefield Vietnam just around the corner many have asked the status of EOD. At current we, like many in the community, are looking forward to evaluating the updated engine and tools available and make an informed decision afterwards.”*⁷⁵

⁷³ <http://www.gamespy.com/previews/january04/swbattlefront/>

⁷⁴ Dave “Fargo” Kosak. “Battlefield Vietnam (PC)” [Gamespy.com](http://www.gamespy.com) March 2004. Available at: <http://www.gamespy.com/reviews/march04/bfvietnampe/>. Last visited 18 March 2004.

⁷⁵ See: <http://www.eodmod.com/news.html>. Last visited 08-04-2004.

4.3 Blurring boundaries? The case of Desert Combat

The most popular⁷⁶ mod for Battlefield is Desert Combat (Trauma Studios, 2003). This Gulf War themed mod, it weighs more than 600 MB, is a total conversion of Battlefield 1942 and stands out in sophistication and detail. In the last week of 2003 an employee of a website hosting game files noted: “*The full client for Desert Combat is knocking on the door of 900,000. If you include the patch for DC, however, the BF1942 Mod jumps to an amazing 1.2 million downloads*”(Fileplanet Weekly, 2003). Desert Combat’s success has grown ever since. While many thought that the Desert Combat team was just extremely dedicated or talented, it recently became clear that Trauma Studios, the mod team behind Desert Combat, had only one goal with their mod, breaking into the game industry and becoming full time commercial game developers. Frank Delise, the companies’ director says in an interview:

“I decided to form a company around Desert Combat early on. Regardless if DC was going to do well or not, I wanted to make sure that the idea and assets were protected. So we formed Trauma Studios so that we could get contributor agreements in place.”⁷⁷

Of course the efforts of Trauma Studios are not unique. The game development studio Liquid Element, developer of the single player mod Spatial Fear also signal the “hope to someday break into the commercial game design industry”⁷⁸. The extent to what modders want to modify to make a game “theirs” is sometimes astonishing. Desert Combat has a mod of its own Desert Combat Extended (DC Extended mod team, 2003). This again shows kind of attitude modders have towards games (and mods), if you don not like it, change it! The developers of the original Desert Combat do not challenge their extended version and report on the development of the Extended version on their homepage. The license of Desert Combat Extended is clear about the open-source ethos of the modmakers:

License. Total FREEWARE! I only ask you keep the original file intact for everyone's sake. You can distribute it free of charge. You can also hack away at it and rip some code from it if you want. Just don't call it DC_Extended anymore. Find your own name. I don't want to have 20 different versions of DC_Extended floating around so please

⁷⁶Although Battlefield 1942 stats can not be tracked (Bowen, 2004) and the number of online players of Desert Combat is unknown, the number of downloads indicates Desert Combat is a very popular file downloaded by millions.

⁷⁷ John [JCal] Callahan “Trauma Studios Interview” HomeLAN.com 1 April 2004. Available: <http://www.homelanfed.com/index.php?id=22011>. Last visited 09-04-2004.

⁷⁸ See: <http://dynamic5.gamespy.com/~le/?f=1>. Last visited 08-04-2004.

respect the name DCX for everyone's sake. I do NOT require any credits for my work. All the code is free to use for map specific vehicles and any other mods.”⁷⁹

The Battlefield mods show the use of both existing IP and original themes in a creative fashion. While game companies do not restrict any (war) theme and companies with strong ties to old media loosen their grip on IP rights, such as LucasArts with the Star Wars movies, other industries can limit the possible themes of mods, as the example of toy manufacturer Hasbro shows. The example of Desert Combat shows that a mod not always has to be made by hobbyists or made for pure entertainment. In the next chapter I will look at mods that are developed no so much for entertainment purposes or reasons of profit, but to convey some sort of message.

5. Extreme Modding (for Dummies)

The Battlefield and the Unreal Universe show the success of mods of popular games. Many mods still are meant as pure entertainment and made with no other goal in mind to give gamers a fun experience. As Jenkins (2002) states that: “*fan culture is dialogic rather than disruptive, affective more than ideological, and collaborative rather than confrontational*”. Fan and mod culture, similar in their ethos and appearance, have a firm grounding in the cultural industry. There is much discussion whether games are able to express ideas and can be ideological constructs. Weise (2003) argues that videogames are an expressive medium and can be so in ways which are varied, complex and unique. There is a misunderstanding, according to Weise, that a game, due to its interactive character, is arbitrary in meaning and symbolism. Although many FPS games discussed in the previous chapters lack any narrative or non-playable sequences, they still should be seen as expressive texts for they are ruled-based systems that convey meaning through the explicit and implicit boundaries put upon players. Frasca (2000) comes with a method for analysing games and simulations and poses that “*the simulation author –and the videogame, game or toy designer- is ideologically responsible for three levels of representation.*” He further makes clear that FPS games can be looked at as rules based systems and can in essence be ideological, for “*there is an essential difference between creating a simulated environment where it is just possible to murder people , and another where you get a reward (score, extra levels) for doing it.*” Sicart (2003) on the other hand argues that FPS games, like Counter Strike do not inhabit any ideological representations. Simulations, such as The Sims (Maxis, 2000) on the other hand, represent a certain ideological discourse trough their rules. I would argue that FPS games and mods do contain to a certain degree, the same sort of ideology, how

⁷⁹ “FAQ”. DCEextended.com. Available: <http://www.dcxextended.com/modules.php?name=FAQ>. Last visited 08-04-2004.

trivial or superficial this ideology may be. Some FPS games are indeed very straightforward, but through their rules, audiovisuals and representation, FPS games can also be ideological constructs. As the following paragraphs will show, mods can be used by different instances, conveying different and sometimes disturbing ideological messages. An example of a more trivial ideology in designing a FPS game is the factor 'fun'. The producers and designers of the much criticised FPS Postal 2 (Running with Scissors, 2003) make it look like their main goal is not making profit but providing a fun experience, and having fun developing it:

"For us it was always about the fun, the comedy, I mean POSTAL is really about adult humour, that was our goal. (...) I'm very proud of POSTAL not because its shock value but because it succeeds in what we set out to do MAKE PEOPLE HAVE FUN. (...) Speaking for RWS (Running with Scissors, the developer of Postal 2, DBN) I can tell you we set out to make POSTAL 2 fun, period!"⁸⁰

This ideology of "providing a fun game", can arguably interact with the notion of the profit motive of the cultural industry, as well as other political or educational ideologies. Postal 2 has been criticized for its dark "humour", it is possible to use a cat as a silencer for a pistol, to destroy a bar, filled with stereotypes of male gays, with Molotov cocktails and at every moment in the game it is possible to urinate. Although Postal 2 is a commercial game, its offensive content, makes it somewhat comparable with other games and mods named in this chapter. This with the fact that Postal 2 could be seen as a simulation and a somewhat simple ideological construct. The manual of Postal 2 poses that the game is only as violent a game as the player wants it to be. When one actually plays the game one will notice that the game is almost impossible to beat playing it in a non violent way. It seems like a valid argument but in the end the argument of the Postal developers touches upon the basic element of a FPS, to point, shoot and to (virtually) kill.

I'm not here to make judgement calls on the content of user-created game modifications. The aim of this paper is to show the current trends in mod-making and giving a sense of the implications of user-agency, co-creative media and the interplay between producers, consumers, co-producers, distributors and fans. The reception by both producers and consumers/gamers of the different mods and games outlined in this paper will give a hint of the actions and reactions of certain 'ideology heavy' mods. Some of the material shown can be condemnable but the final verdict of the content of certain mods lies in the eye of the beholder and I my aim is to be as

⁸⁰ "The State of Gaming" Ownt.com. 07 October 2003. Available : http://www.ownt.com/the_state_of/violent_gaming/violent_gaming.shtml.

objective as possible in my analysis. Writing and researching a mod like Ethnic Cleansing poses difficulties upon a researcher for I have to make a decision to support neo-nazi's by buying their game in order to make an objective play-analysis. I choose to do so because it is an important step in the field of game research, looking beyond the "fun-stuff" and not making the mistake of analysing a game without playing it. This goes especially for the mods in this chapter. It is easy to call these mods, stupid, offensive and many other things but one can only say something about the domain of the game when one actually played it.⁸¹ Jeff, a forum member of the Genesis3D forum, has thoughts about the mod with extreme right content. He expresses a view I strongly relate to:

"As bad as it might seem, here in the USA people have the right to publish such garbage. Just because most people find it offensive that doesn't mean it doesn't have a right to exist. If they don't break any laws than it's a perfectly legal game. (...) Don't get me wrong, I don't support or condone this game. I'm just pointing out that under the laws of the USA they have a right to their opinions, and can create a game that supports those opinions. (...) Also, if there was a ban on certain types of games then who is the judge that determines which games gets banned. I'm willing to put up with other people's beliefs that I don't agree with so I can have my own beliefs and not worry about having them suppressed."⁸²

Both commercial games and mods can be controversial or subversive in various ways. Meant as pieces of art, training modules, conveying an ideological message or serve as (offensive) entertainment, there are many mods that are not that co-created as the popular FPS mods mentioned earlier. Take the following mods, 911 Survivor (Caloud, Cole, Brennon and Kwon, 2003), Ethnic Cleansing (National Alliance, 2002), Special Force (Hizbullah Central Internet Bureau, 2003) and commercial games like America's Army: Special Forces (US Army, 2003) and Postal 2. They do have something in common, namely creating fierce debates among gamers. Especially the 911Survivor mod for Unreal Tournament 2003 (Epic Games, 2003) got many media attention, mainly from various game communities. 911Survivor⁸³ is a simulation of the attack on the Twin Towers. The player is a person whose only objective is to get out of the burning building. This objective can be reached by

⁸¹ Needless to say, I was very offended by the Ethnic Cleansing mod and think of it as a condemnable game. But as The Friends of Voltaire (1906) would say it: "I disapprove of what you say, but I will defend to the death your right to say it."

⁸² See the Genesis 3D forum. This post can be found at:

<http://www.genesis3d.com/forum/viewtopic.php?mode=viewtopic&topic=1001527&forum=8&start=0>.

⁸³ See appendix A for the original design document.

jumping out of the window and jump to ones death. The developers of the mod, four students, say the following about their mod:

“But what is at stake here, when we consider the 911 Survivor mod, in which four gamers have rebuilt the World Trade Centre moments after it was hit – is an understanding of why we indulge in fantasies. (...) Why would anyone want to spend endless hours practising to kill enemies in a computer game? The answer is specifically because these activities are fantasy, because we can’t perform them in real life. (...) This game mod sets out to provide both the makers, and all other users, with an opportunity to empathically comprehend the reality of what happened at the WTC”⁸⁴

Strong opinions were voiced in favour, but also against this work of art⁸⁵ in online discussions by game developers and gamers. Gamers gave their view on the 911 Survivor mod and after a few reactions many debates deteriorated into those who favoured the mod, mainly Europeans and those who were against it.

- *“saw this posted in another forum. kinda a touchy subject for quite a few still so I think these guys are treading on real thin ice.”*
- *“I don't get it. Why would anyone make a game out of one of the biggest tragedies in US history? Oh! I know! Because they're SICK MOFOS!! Unj”⁸⁶*

Those who are in favour or would not prohibit the publishing of the mod, pointed out that many similar tragedy's like the fighting in WWII, Vietnam and even the recent Gulf Wars and that many games/simulations have a similar up-to-date theme. Gamers however seem eager to use contemporary issues, they do not hesitate to name their online characters “Osama” or “KillBushjr” and create skins that have the appearance of both characters (c.f. Poremba, 2003). Also the success of the mod Desert Combat shows the popularity of actual themes.

One of the first mods meant as a protest or depending on ones view, as a work of art is the Counter Strike modification called Velvet Strike⁸⁷ (Schleiner, 2002). This mod contains a set of peace themed/anti-violence sprays for a Counter Strike graffiti patch). Gamers can oppose the games violent message and (hidden) ideological values, constituted by its audiovisuals (Poremba, 2003). One of the most well known

controversial mods on the other hand may well be the one made by one of the Columbine killers, Eric Harris. He made a DOOM II (id Games, 1994) mod called U.A.C. Labs. There are many misunderstandings about this mod, dealing with the idea that Harris made the mod to train for his attack. Most misunderstandings stem from the lack of a proper play-analysis and lack of knowledge about the FPS genre (Aarseth, 2003). Morris (2003b) quotes Dave Grossman (1999) in her article “The Computer Game Moral Panic”: *“he (Grossman, DBN) describes Eric Harris’ map-making efforts as indicative of a pathological relationship with the game: ‘In fact Eric Harris reprogrammed his edition of Doom so that it looked like his neighbourhood, complete with the houses of the people he hated’ when making a map of a real area from one’s own surroundings is a common practice among game mapmakers.”* This example again shows the misunderstanding about this simple mod, one of many. An error grounded in the fear of the unknown. The parents of the murdered children however saw violent videogames, and DOOM II in particular, as one of the main causes of the shootings. They sued id Games and other video game companies but the suit against the companies was dismissed in 2002. This lawsuit, many gamers saw it as an erroneous endeavour, resulted in an original protest, a mod for the (Harris) mod appeared⁸⁸, this time protesting against the parents starting the lawsuit. This second (protest) mod resulted in another protest, in the form of an online petition⁸⁹, on a mod that was a protest, against the parents of the children killed in the Columbine shooting. Parents, who filed a lawsuit against a mod, made by a two high-school students, who made their mod as a protest against society⁹⁰.

5.1 Extremist (Right) modding

American neo-nazi's also found their way into popular culture and started to make mods of their own⁹¹. Take NiggaZDoom. This DOOM (id Software, 1994) mod is *“much like Redneck Rampage, except the colors are reversed, knowwhatumsayin? Ever wish you could go to the local hood and blast away some crazy niggaz? Well now you can, thanks to NiggaZDoom!”⁹²* The more sophisticated mod Ethnic Cleansing (National Alliance, 2002) is another example of an extreme right mod, using a freely available open-source game program, the Genesis 3D game engine. The game is published by an on-line white power music distributor and released in 2002 on Martin Luther King Day.

⁸⁸ “Columbine mod for Half-Life” Gamedev.net, 04 March 2002. Available: http://www.gamedev.net/community/forums/topic.asp?topic_id=54364 Last visited 3 March 2004.

⁸⁹ Frank Herrman “Petitie tegen Columbine High School mod” Gamer.nl, 15 July 2001. Available: <http://www.gamer.nl/nieuws/8713>.

⁹⁰ See <http://www.gamespot.com/features/6090892/p-7.html>

⁹¹ See <http://www.aryanetwork.com/games/> for an overview of video games with extreme right content.

⁹² See: <http://geocities.com/niggazdoom/>. Last visited 03-04-2004.

⁸⁴ See <http://www.selectparks.net/links/ftwk.htm>. Last visited 3 March 2004.

⁸⁵ The 911 Survivor mod is meant as a piece of art although this was not clear by gamers and the gaming press when this mod surfaced.

⁸⁶ See: <http://www.triponthis.net/forums/showthread.php?t=1651> Last visited 5 March 2004.

⁸⁷ See <http://www.opensorcery.net/velvet-strike/about.html> Last visited 5 March 2004.

This software has been distributed under an open-source license since 1999 and WildTangent, the original developers of the software package, has no involvement with any of the mods mentioned hereafter. The developers of [Ethnic Cleansing](#) also used the Reality Factory Games Developer Kit from the open source community. Neither of both open source programs has any extreme right content. The choice for this engine is obvious, nobody can prevent the developers of this mod to develop and produce it, at least not by using this technology. The EULA of [Unreal Tournament 2004](#) (Epic Games, 2004) is clear what you can not do with their engine:

Section 10. Point iii. *“Your Mods must not contain any libellous, defamatory, or other illegal material, material that is scandalous or invades the rights of privacy or publicity of any third party, nor may your Mods contain, or be used in conjunction with, any trademarks, copyright-protected work, or other recognizable property of third parties, nor may your Mods be used by you, or anyone else, for any commercial exploitation including, but not limited to, advertising or marketing for a company, product or service.”* (End User License Agreement, [Unreal Tournament 2004](#))

This would make it hard for this mod to use a state-of-the-arts engine without being sued. By simply using existing recourses, sounds, textures and images, the developers created a “realistic” urban environment where the avatar, a white male in his twenties, dressed in black, can use a variety of weapons to kill (mainly black and Latino) opponents. The game shows many references to extreme right ideology by ingame posters on the walls and the skins of non-playing characters and nazi-symbolism in menu’s and the cd-cover. The game has some obvious examples of extreme right ‘values’ and the game is full of “jokes”. The cd inlay for [Ethnic Cleansing](#) states: *“run through the ghetto blasting away various blacks and spics in an attempt to gain entrance to the subway system...where the jews have hidden to avoid the carnage. Then if your lucky you can blow away jews as they scream “Oy Vey!”, on your way to their command centre.”* When one kills a black opponent, players are forced by gameplay to do so for the opponents shoot back, there are “realistic”⁹³ monkey sounds. The end boss of the game is the Israeli Prime Minister Ariel Sharon. The developers of [Ethnic Cleansing](#) give the following reason for the development of their mod: *“We want to reach young people, and this is the medium that will do that. As long as electronic games are out there, as long as they are affecting most people, we have an obligation to use them to spread our message”* (Wiltensburg, 2003). While [Ethnic Cleansing](#) is by all standards a really crappy game with a lousy gameplay and it remains to be seen how many people actually played the game, the game did give birth to some strong opposition, not only from gamers but also anti-racists groups

⁹³ Or as the back cover of the cd inlay says “authentic negro sounds”.

and open-source software users. The Anti-Defamation League says the following about [Ethnic Cleansing](#):

“While we strongly support the First Amendment right of gamers to use software to create modified versions of popular games or new games, we are concerned that racists and anti-Semites will continue to use open-source engines to spread hate and bigotry. We urge you and responsible members of the software industry to consider setting an industry-wide standard that would help stop hate groups from turning open-source games into propaganda tools.” (ADL, 2002)

The official Genesis 3D website spoke out and gave their view of the mod. They are not able to prohibit the game because it does not violate any of the license agreements of the Genesis3D engine.

*“Novus Delta, WildTangent, Eclipse Entertainment and the Genesis3D community as a whole, would like to stress that we both condemn and discourage the views expressed in this game. Genesis3D is an open-source, free, engine. As such, there is little we can do to control the content of each and every product created using Genesis3D. We would like to hope that developers using the engine will be responsible about their content, but that is not always the case.”*⁹⁴

A mod that has many resemblances with [Ethnic Cleansing](#), but has an ideology complete opposite towards the extreme right ideology, is the mod [Special Force](#). This mod uses the exact same open-source engine and there is an ironic resemblance within the domain of the game, the end-boss of [Special Force](#) is Ariel Sharon.

“Special Force, which depicts scenarios its creators claim are based on actual Hizbullah firefights against Israeli forces, recently went on sale at stores in Lebanon, Syria, Iran, Bahrain, and United Arab Emirates. Intended for all ages, the game sold out its initial run of 100,000 copies for \$7 apiece in its first week. In an e-mail interview, Haj Fouad, of the Central Internet Bureau of Hizbullah, says it isn't the game's direct aim to boost the group's membership. Rather, “the game intends to interest the players to learn the history of what really happened in the south of Lebanon ... and deliver a message that man should defend his country and land against the usurpers and occupiers.” (Wiltensburg, 2003)

⁹⁴ Post made by ‘jwvanderbeck’ at 2002-03-06 19:40:05 on the Genesis 3D homepage. See <http://www.genesis3d.com/>.

Special Force is not the first game that puts players into the Middle East conflict from the perspective of a Palestinian young man. The free FPS Underash (Supersoft, 2002) gives gamers a chance to “dry up their tears; heal their wounds; remove all the feelings of humiliation, humbleness and wretchedness from their souls, and draw the smile of hope and the sense of dignity and efficiency on their faces.” This is done by looking through the eyes of a young man from Palestine, carrying a weapon. The goal of the game is to represent the life stages of the displayed avatar and involves shooting (Israeli) soldiers and settlers.

As the games and mods in this chapter have shown, there are implications not to be overlooked by letting users do what they want. These implications are not technology (PC or console) specific, games as media can be as offensive as a movie or a book. It is only the place of games within popular culture that makes them ideal objects for some to convey a message of hate, pride or fear.

5.2 The Trend is death!?

While almost all new FPS games that come out today are moddable, America's Army: Special Forces is an exception to this rule. America's Army is a state-of-the-art FPS, based on Unreal technology, primarily meant as a recruiting tool and the Army tries to limit interpretations of the game and tries (by various ways) to create a “model reading” of their game. The fear of a mod showing e.g. Bin Laden or being able to shoot American soldiers and divert the ideology of the Army game, is bigger than the possible gain in new content. The game thus shows a split with the ever-increasing user-agency and the production of user created content by denying gamers to produce their own modifications of the game(-engine). On the other hand the developers implicitly encourage a fan culture surrounding the game, by ways of branding the Army, viral marketing and offering a site for a military themed discourse.⁹⁵ The Army game has commerce at the core of its brand identity (Van der Graaf en Nieborg, 2003) and the US Army looks into the possibilities of tapping into fan culture, to both expand their brand and get their recruiting message across. The fora of both the official website as well as fan sites⁹⁶ show videos, wallpapers and many other fan created texts. There is some evidence of the (US) military looking into these new skills and it is interesting to note that some people actually encourage the army to look at the (creative) power of mod communities: “*Really creative trainers and developers will even find ways to mesh some of the standard authoring tools with the mods, blending some of the new and traditional training approaches*” (Prensky, 2003). There is also some

⁹⁵ Li (2004) poses that America's Army provides a “civilian-military public sphere”, a conclusion that is very far from my own experience playing the game.

⁹⁶ See <http://aaotracker.4players.de>. Last visited 12-04-2004.

evidence that the Army will allow user created content to be played for America's Army over time (Li, 2004), but this is uncertain.

6. Conclusion

By looking at several FPS mods, the implications of user-participation for both the original producers of FPS games and consumers, becomes clear. The existing theories on participatory culture and participatory design and looking at games as co-creative media are still valid but need slight adjustments. As Jenkins (2002) states: “*New tools and technologies enable consumers to archive, annotate, appropriate, and recirculate media content. (2) A range of subcultures promote Do-It-Yourself (DIY) media production, a discourse that shapes how consumers have deployed those technologies*”. The discursive elements around mods offer an interesting site for analysis of these two trends. Amateur developers and commercial developers have a slightly different view of what they see as a mod. Ideas given shape by previous encounters with open-source media or constituted for reasons of copyright protection or profit.

Analysis of the Unreal Universe shows that the video game industry has changed the bottom-up manifestations of mod-makers by creating an artificial, industry stimulated culture and by institutionalising the FPS mod-community and offering gamers incentives, e.g. tools and money, to create free content, tools and knowledge. The Unreal Universe shows a commodified process of developers actively enhancing participatory culture and triggering modders to come up with free material. Not only original bottom-up modes of production become corrupted, there is also a trend of commercialisation of mods, the mod community and all of its assets. It becomes clear that it is the game industry who ‘puts the mod in commodification’. This trend however does not hamper a beneficial flow between gamers and the industry, benefiting both. The game development industry can profit from the knowledge and content the modding community comes up with. The Battlefield Franchise on the other hand shows the enormous creative energy and enthusiasm modders have developing localised and highly customised mods. An implication of these new intertextual commodities becomes clear. On the one hand there is innovation and the creation of original Intellectual Property (IP), but there is also the appropriation of existing IP and themes, resulting in interesting implications for both modders and the game industry. The easily available and accessible technologies for making mods can be enabled for almost any purpose. This results in the development of mods with an other purpose than serving as pure entertainment. These mods are there to get across a some sort of message and are, and will be in the future, developed to shock, brand, offend, recruit or serve as a piece of art, making mods and the FPS mod-culture an interesting site to look.

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Appendix A.

Original Design Document 911Survivor

Available : <http://www.selectparks.net/archive/911survivor/911game.html>

- Recreate Twin Towers
 - Different floors need to be in different states - normal, fiery, debris, and mixes of each
 - Stairways
 - Lit, unlit, flickering light, destroyed & unusable
 - NPCs - running up & down stairs, huddled in fear, etc.
- Character models
 - Businesswoman
 - Businessman
 - Fireman
 - Policeman
 - Custom behaviors
 - Create paths to walk
- Visual Effects
 - Fire
 - Camera Shake
 - Items
 - Cell Phone - functions as light source, but doesn't dial
 - Flashlight/lighter
 - Water bottle - restore health?
 - Face mask/cloth/handkerchief - avoid breathing in smoke & dust
- Scenarios
 - Spawn points in different parts of building; some have possibility for survival, some don't
 - Can escape because user is at low level
 - Rushing through dark stairwells with cellphone == escape
 - If firemen are encountered, user is saved
 - Floor in flames - can't escape
 - Ceiling collapses
 - Have to choose between being engulfed by flames or jumping from window
 - Cement/building dust/smoke make it difficult to breathe; no facemask causes life to deplete, so find facemask
 - Length of each scenario?
- Sounds (& Soundtrack?)
 - Crackling flames
 - Walls collapsing
 - Yells and screams
 - Fire alarms
 - Police and Firetruck sirens
- User Interface
 - No HUD
 - Show item, only if equipped with it (lighter, flashlight, etc.)
- Other
 - Title screen & menu
 - Multiplayer?
 - Spectator mode - follow & observe bots