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Am I Mod or Not? - An analysis of First Person Shooter modification culture.

David B. Nieborg

Institute of Media & Re/Presentation

Utrecht University | The Netherlands

David.Nieborg@let.uu.nl / David@GameSpace.nl

[Http://www.GameSpace.nl](http://www.GameSpace.nl)

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. 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.

Keywords

Games, First-Person-Shooter, modification, mods, Unreal Universe, Battlefield franchise.

Introduction.

“Last night at about 9:00 PST, Half-Life 2: Deathmatch was released. Earlier today there were about 12,000 simultaneous HL2DM players. People seem to have gotten the hang of tossing toilets and radiators and cars at each other pretty quickly.”¹

One of the most anticipated First Person Shooter (FPS) PC-games ever, Half Life 2 (Valve Software, 2004), was released November 16 2004 via Valve’s online content platform Steam and through outlets all over the world. The game is lauded by both the gaming press and gamers for its innovative graphics and its gameplay-integrated physics simulation system. But not only the game itself, nor the Steam platform are fascinating innovations, the ethos of Valve towards user-created modifications (mods) is worthwhile exploring. Only two weeks after its launch, Valve released Half Life 2: Deathmatch together with only two maps. This announcement was accompanied by a Map Making Contest and earlier that month Valve released a free Software Development Kit (SDK).² This example shows the comfort and trust game developers seem to have towards their audience. Just put out a new game (Half Life 2: Deathmatch), give gamers an excuse (a contest), give them the right tools (the Source SDK plus documentation), facilitate peer-feedback and interaction (fora, IRC channels) and in the end modders come up with new maps. A quick look at servers running Half Life 2: Deathmatch shows that ‘the plan is working’; within a week already ten new user-created maps were available.

The aim of this paper is twofold. The first aim is to look at the current trends regarding co-created content for computer games, as well as to document these trends by giving an overview of two (commercially) popular FPS PC games and the mod-culture surrounding both games.³ 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. The Unreal Universe serves as a case study for this topic. The second aim is to question the status of user-created content; i.e. what constitutes a mod and is there a need for a (re)definition of mods? An analysis of games and mods in the Battlefield Franchise serve as a case study here.

The methodology in this paper is based on three texts (Konzack, 2002; Aarseth, 2003; Nieborg, 2004a), which provide concepts and tools for a more systematic analysis of

¹ See: <http://www.steampowered.com/index.php?area=news&archive=yes&id=365>. Last visited: 09 December 2004.

² See: <http://www.steampowered.com/index.php?area=news&archive=yes&id=340>, <http://www.valve-erc.com/srcsdk/> and http://steampowered.com/?area=map_contest. Last visited: 09 December 2004.

³ Because of the lack of consensus surrounding the discussion of game genres, I will use the following 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 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 FPS game. This paper is in fact a modification itself. It is based on the paper "Who put the mod in commodification? - A descriptive analysis of the First Person Shooter mod culture" (Nieborg, 2004b), which offers a more elaborate and detailed analysis of the FPS mod culture. 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 a game a complete new look. The most drastic and visible mods for FPS games are so called total conversions. A total conversion is a complete overhaul of an existing game. It changes, varying on the status of the mod, the theme of a game which results in a modification of (almost) all elements. For example, the science-fiction oriented FPS Unreal Tournament 2004 (Epic Games, 2004) has been modified into the slower paced World War Two shooter Red Orchestra (Red Orchestra mod team, 2003). The focus in this article is on total conversion modifications, for this form of modmaking incorporates all other sorts of user-created content - i.e. maps, skins, audio changes and the like.

Game modifications are obviously not FPS specific, but the modification culture for the FPS genre is well developed and (heavily) institutionalised. The focus of both game developers/publishers and gamers/fans on the technological advancements in the genre may well contribute to the ongoing technological interplay between both parties. Other game genres have their respective mod cultures as well, e.g. Real Time Strategy (RTS) games/simulations often include a map editor in order to enable users to come up with their own battlegrounds and the life-simulation of The Sims (Maxis, 2000) also has a well-developed community providing user-created content. For long, users have tinkered with the possibilities of modifying the content and gameplay of games. The earliest computer games 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.

Participatory Culture & Co-creative Media

The multicast and participatory nature of the Internet changes notions of the status of readers and fans formerly associated with broadcast technology, significantly. Modders are currently able to directly influence the game development industry on all levels, ranging from a technological influence to influencing (future) game design and supplying a workforce for the commercial game development industry. This symbiotic relationship is one of mutual respect and dependency. Many modders become game designers themselves

transgressing a barrier seldom so easily crossed in other media industries. The player/author in the FPS mod community has a relationship that is the opposite of the relationship between the producers of television series and fans. The latter is one more of mutual suspicion or even open conflict (Jenkins, 1992), emotions which seem to be absent in the FPS mod community. Although the main source of the production of primary game texts still lies with commercial developers and a much smaller number of major game publishers, there is an ideological hegemony in the discourse and practices surrounding user created content allowing modders to share content and contribute to game development. This almost frictionless bond lessens user resistance to the primary text - "if you don't like the game, simply mod it!"

Morris (2003) argues that multiplayer FPS games have become "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." 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, functioning inside commodity culture, where consumers become co-creators.

Online communities of FPS games are "vocal, influential, highly social and considers itself self-regulating and, to a certain degree, self-determining" (Morris, 2003), 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. "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 move players into a hybrid state of 'game play' subjectivity (Marshall, 2002). By producing additional or replaceable 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 following two chapters will provide an overview of two heavily modded PC FPS games, their developers and communities, in order to shed light upon the FPS mod culture,

to deepen the understanding of this culture and to facilitate a discussion of what a FPS mod is (or should be).

The Unreal Universe

The Unreal Universe consists of several virtual and physical clusters of communities, centred on Unreal Engine powered games, such as Unreal Tournament 2004 (Epic Games, 2004). 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. The success of the Unreal franchise can for a great deal be traced back to the mindset of the developers of the first Unreal games regarding mods as well as the use and distribution of the Unreal engine technology.⁴ Although this claim may seem overly technological deterministic, the Unreal developers are explicit about the role of their gaming technology and the strong points of their brand when they describe the history of their first game Unreal (Digital Extremes, 1998):

"1998 Unreal is published. It goes on to define 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, what-you-see-is-what-you-get development tools, a next-generation scripting language, and extraordinary customizability."⁵

According to the authors of the Top Ten of First Person Shooters, the success of Unreal Tournament (Digital Extremes, 1999) was mainly due to the mods and mutators available for the game (Parker, 2004). The Unreal engine was from the beginning developed in a way that enabled easy access to all components of its technology (Au, 2002). The ease of use of the (modification) technology and the editors wholly integrated into the game technology, resulted in amateur game developers now having easy access to the tools of the trade. Over the years the Unreal technology and the accompanying mod culture expanded immensely and an analysis of the games Unreal Tournament 2003 (Epic Games, 2003) and Unreal Tournament 2004 (Epic Games, 2004) shows many initiatives by its developers to facilitate, institutionalise and encourage and Unreal-powered modification culture.

In an interview with a 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:

⁴ The Unreal Engine is also known as the Unreal II Engine, the UT2003/2004 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.

⁵ See "UT History" [Unrealtournament.com](http://www.unrealtournament.com). Available: <http://www.unrealtournament.com/general/history.php>. Last visited 06-12-2004.

"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 to encourage mod-makers; i.e. the publishing of an UT2004 Special Edition (SE) DVD and the Make Something Unreal (MSU) contest. The DVD includes several important components needed for successful mod making. First of all the game itself is found on the first DVD containing an enormous amount of maps, skins and other game material to toy around with. The second DVD contains the user-friendly GUI editor UnrealEd 3.0 to edit all Unreal related material, as well as other tools used by the original game developers. The third component of the SE DVD is the educational component. The second DVD is packed with more than 150 hours of expert video tutorials on making modifications for UT2004.⁶ The tutorials covers almost all areas of developing content for the game, starting with level design, digging into making machinima, learning to make weapons, mutators, characters and vehicles. Each area is divided into several sub-areas and then divided into several topics, resulting in more than 270 video tutorials.

When New York 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 was until then not exactly a book for making mods, but there was more than 150 hours of video material. Later, the makers of the video tutorials wrote the 704-paged book *Mastering Unreal Technology: The Art of Level Design* (Busby, Parrish & VanEenwyk, 2004) covering all aspects of Unreal level design. After the success of the demo I had some troubles to get my hand on the special edition of UT2004 and read on several occasions that there were some issues with the shipping of the SE DVD.⁷ Modding seems be very popular and gamers are eager to show their (new) craftsmanship. In addition, the SE DVD is complemented with the Unreal Tournament 2004 Editors Choice edition. This retail version

⁶ 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 VTMs, 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.

⁷ The 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](http://www.homelanfed.com). 5 April 2004. Available: <http://www.homelanfed.com/index.php?id=22177>. Last visited: 05-04-2004.

is packed with new content (i.e. maps, vehicles and characters) and a second DVD containing several mods handpicked by the developers.

To stimulate mod-making not only virtual education is offered, but modders can also visit the Unreal University. The title University is somewhat misleading. In November 2003 at the North Carolina State University there was a two-day event with tutorials covering all techniques needed for creating mods for the Unreal Tournament 2004 game engine.⁸ At this meeting 200 mod-makers, game designers, programmers and artists working on mods, met. The Unreal University event is said to be held annually and the second gathering was supposedly held in August 2004 at the University of Southern California.

Besides education, the Unreal developers also added an extra stimulus to encourage amateur developers. A mod stimulating initiative, co-sponsored by graphics card manufacturer NVIDIA, is the "\$1,000,000 NVIDIA Make Something Unreal Contest". The ever increasing demand for better 3D rendering technology obviously plays direct into the hands of the manufacturers of sophisticated 3D technologies. There is one million dollars to be divided in this contest consisting of four phases, each divided into several categories such as best tool, best map and best total conversion. The result of the Make Something Unreal Contest coupled with the SE DVD resulted in a remarkable amount of original content. An example of a total conversion far removed from fast-paced action of UT2004 is Duffers Golf (Coil Games, 2004) allowing gamers to play online golf with up to 32 people.⁹

The Unreal Universe shows a range of initiatives instigated by the game developers to institutionalise and commoditise a user-driven culture. The bottom-up practice of developing mods is collaborative in nature and in certain cases somewhat artificially created. There is an absence of criticism on the rise of commodification practices within gaming culture. There seems to be a consensus in the FPS mod culture discourse of a win-win situation, modders are seen as player/authors (Poremba, 2003) instead of full-fledged developers. Modding is looked upon not so much as labour, but almost as an extension of gaming. The work done values the modder and is a personal enrichment for this person. Squire (2003) extends the notion of the interplay between the cultural industry and readers when he looks at how the game industry uses the potential of their emerging fan-base and dubs this process "participatory design."¹⁰ 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

⁸ "Unreal University 2003" Available: <http://cde.ncsu.edu/uu2003/>. Last visited 08-04-2004.

⁹ See <http://duffers.beyondunreal.com/>. Last visited 07 December 2004.

¹⁰ "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."

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 (and create) free tools and software. On the other hand the question is whether these participatory and collaborative elements within FPS mod culture are as bottom-up as some argue it to be. In other words; are we witnessing the rise and subsequent fall of FPS mod culture based on an open-source ethos or are we at the beginning of a new era featuring cleverly commoditised user-created content?

The Battlefield franchise

*"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."*¹¹

The Battlefield franchise 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 Two theme and can be played in both single- and multiplayer mode. The multiplayer part made the game an instant commercial hit by successfully introducing vehicular combat. The Battlefield franchise was recently supplemented by Battlefield Vietnam (Digital Illusions, 2004), a FPS very similar to the previous Battlefield games, but with a different theatre of war. The mod community of Battlefield is diverse and active, which makes the Battlefield franchise an excellent object of research when looking for trends in the FPS mod-community and thus the implications of user-created content.¹² It is said that more people play Battlefield mods than the original Battlefield 1942.¹³

It sounds like a great Battlefield mod, Battlefield Intellectual Property (IP). You would have two parties, the 'mod-makers' and 'the IP holders'. As games become more and more intertextual and mods 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 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

¹¹ "Battlefield Newsletter" [EA.com](http://www.eagames.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.

¹² See: http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/List_of_Battlefield_1942_mods for list of over 150 (un)released total conversion of Battlefield 1942. Last visited 09 Dec. 04.

¹³ This claim is made here: http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Battlefield_1942#Mods. Last visited 09 Dec. 04.

See <http://www.bftracks.com/appl/bft/Metadata/view> for real time data. At BFtracks.com the mods Desert Combat and Forgotten Hope constitute half of the active player bases.

to those who choose otherwise. By letting users not only freely produce what they want, but by also endorsing and stimulating mod-making, as the developers of the Battlefield franchise 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 developers of a GI Joe Mod stumbled upon the boundaries of using existing IP.¹⁴ Lawyers of the Hasbro Corporation, a toy manufacturer and owner of the GI Joe IP, had contacted the mod team and issued a cease and desist letter.¹⁵ The modders show their regrets of not being permitted to use the GI Joe theme to make a Battlefield 1942 mod, but are hard-pressed to move on. The motives of Hasbro for stopping the mod will always be unknown. It can be a simple matter of principle, “it is our IP, so we decide what to do with it” or it may be fear (of the unknown). By letting a group of modders interact with a text, 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 creative enough and willing to come up with original IP.

As the mods Silent Heroes (Team Silent Heroes, 2003) and The Lost Battalion (Lost Battalion mod team, 2003) 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 examples of Battlefield mods with an original theme are Siege (Siege mod team, 2003) and Battlefield Pirates (Scurvy Cove Productions, 2003).¹⁶ Siege is a medieval based modification, complete with horses, castles, swords and catapults. On the website the developers proclaim: “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 versus 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).¹⁷ This mod is remarkable in two ways. It uses the copyrighted material from LucasArts, the owner of Star Wars IP. Many elements of the mod, its avatars, music and vehicles are directly copied from the Star

¹⁴ See: <http://www.planetbattlefield.com/gi/>. Last visited 05-04-2004.

¹⁵ GI Joe is a American military themed cartoon and toy-series. See <http://www.hasbro.com/gijoe/default.cfm>. Last visited 05-04-2004.

¹⁶ See: <http://www.planetbattlefield.com/siege/> or <http://www.bfpirates.com/>. Last visited 05-04-2004.

¹⁷ See: <http://www.galactic-conquest.net/> Last visited 05-04-2004.

Wars saga. What makes this approach of LucasArts remarkable is the announcement of their own commercially developed FPS title Star Wars: Battlefront (LucasArts, 2004). In a preview in gaming magazine Edge (Edge, 2004) a reviewer directly compares the two FPS games, and even goes as far, lacking a preview copy, to look at the Battlefield mod to get the sense of what Star Wars: Battlefront might be about. The permission to use Star Wars IP 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.

Blurring boundaries? The case of Desert Combat

The most played total conversion mod for Battlefield 1942 is Desert Combat (Trauma Studios, 2003).¹⁸ This Gulf War themed multiplayer mod weighs more than 950 MB and stands out in sophistication and detail. The gameplay of Desert Combat (DC) focuses on modern day combat resulting in fast-paced action sequences, an element that may well have contributed to its popularity. According to the developers, the mod is centred on present-day conflicts in the Middle East from the Gulf War, Somalia, and Afghanistan to possible future conflicts.¹⁹ 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. The hard work of the Desert Combat mod team paid off and September 2004 the commercial developer of Battlefield franchise, Digital Illusions, bought Trauma Studios together with all of its assets and employees. In 2005 Battlefield 2 will debut, this sequel looks like an updated and extended version of Desert Combat and has the same contemporary Middle-East war theme.

The extent to what modders want to modify a game to make it “theirs”, is sometimes astonishing. The mod Desert Combat has two mods of its own. Desert Combat Extended (DC Extended mod team, 2004) focuses on adding “more fun”, while the Desert Combat Realism Mod (Desert Combat Realism mod team, 2004) “attempts to bring DC gameplay closer to how the real equipment behaves.”²⁰ Both mods show the kind of attitude modders generally have towards games (and mods): ‘if you don not like it, change it’! Both mods team explicitly state not being rivals or critics of the original Desert Combat, but merely providing additional fun and extend the game experience. The

¹⁸ Although Battlefield 1942 stats (i.e. Gamespy technology) can not track individual mods 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. The Desert Combat Public Beta v.7 full client has been downloaded more than 1.3 million times in five months from Fileplanet.com alone. See: <http://www.fileplanet.com/files/120000/121935.shtml>. Last visited: 7 December 2004.

¹⁹ See: <http://www.desertcombat.com/?page=info>. Last visited 30 November 2004.

²⁰ See: <http://www.dcxextended.com/index.php> and <http://tanelorn.sublimedev.com/>. Last visited: 7 December 2004.

developers of the original Desert Combat on their turn do not challenge the extended versions and reported on the development of DC Extended on their homepage.

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 has to be made for pure entertainment.

Am I mod or not?

On the one hand FPS mod culture is stimulated, institutionalised and becomes a collaborative instead of a participatory culture. The business model of the game development industry, using proprietary engines, and using End User License Agreements (EULAs) to demarcate the boundaries between mods and “illegal content”, results in a self-censoring and commodified culture. Games with strong ideological and potential offensive content chose to use the open-source Genesis3D engine, instead of e.g. the more technological advanced Unreal Engine.²¹ Games such as the extreme-right Ethnic Cleansing, (National Alliance, 2002), the anti-Israel game Special Force (Hizbullah Central Internet Bureau, 2003), and the religious shooter Catechumen (N'Lightning Software, 2000) all use the same open-source game technology.²²

On the other hand users move in and out of commercially endorsed mod communities and create border line cases that challenge the status of user-created nature of mods. Although both gamers and scholars do not have any trouble with the term ‘mod’ and seem to 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. When looking at the total conversion mods in the Unreal Universe and the Battlefield Franchise, I want to challenge existing notions of FPS games and mods. The following discussion is not meant to be totally inclusive of all examples; the main goal is to show the complex status of user-created content and the many exceptions to the rule, as well as to facilitate a discussion and to deepen the understanding of FPS mods.

Sotaama (2003) made a start towards the definition of a mod: “In case of computer games mod is usually used when referring to user-made modification to pre-existing

²¹ The EULA of UT2004, section 10, point III, explicitly states that: 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)

²² See: <http://www.genesis3d.com/>. Last visited 05-04-2004.

game.” The online open-source encyclopaedia Wikipedia adds to this definition that mods are in general required to be non-commercial and sometimes open source as well.²³ Cheats, hacks or patches do not qualify as mods because contemporary FPS discourse seems to have singled these specific forms of software out and granted them their own label. The main question in the discussion of “what is a mod?” would then be: “Who developed what?”. The “Who” can be a group ranging from player/authors, users, amateur (developers), modders or commercial developers and the “what” would be the technology.

If one sees mods solely as the modification of an existing game and uses this as a very strict definition of a mod (i.e. the adaptation of an existing game and / or engine), many commercial games could actually be seen as mods. Because the cost of building a new up-to-date game engine, many commercial game developers license an existing engine and adapt it to their needs. Diverse commercial games as Postal 2 (Running with Scissors, 2003), America's Army: Special Forces (US Army 2004) and Tom Clancy's Splinter Cell (Ubisoft Montreal, 2002) are based on a version of the Unreal engine, but no one would qualify them as mods. The Genesis3D games, although based on open-source technology, are not free either and can not be labelled as mods. A non-commercial motive, as defined by the Wikipedia definition, seems to be a necessary addition. Desert Combat Extended and Desert Combat Realism, both mods of a mod, hinder a clear-cut definition of a mod as well, since they are not based on a pre-existing (or commercial) game. Thus the idea of a “pre-existing game” should be as broad as possible and must include both commercial as well as user-created games.

Through the rapid development in information and communication technologies and the open source ethos of game developers, every modder is currently able to make a hit game. The Holy Grail for many mod teams has become to develop “the next Counter-Strike”. If Counter Strike shows anything, it is the limited resources that are used to gain access to the means of commercial cultural production. The influence of the mod Counter-Strike on other (tactical) FPS games as well as its influence on entertainment industry's decisions, are significant. Not only have gamers now access to the same tools as commercial developers, they also gain more and more access to the same distribution channels as a large number of games become available online.

The mod Desert Combat questions the idea of gamers making mods. Are the developers of Desert Combat, who have a very real indirect financial motive, player/authors or do they resemble commercial developers? As a text, Desert Combat is still a total conversion modification, it is based on a pre-existing game using a commercial

²³ “Mods in general are required to be non-commercial (free) when they include any parts from another mod, or the main game, which by their nature they always do. Some mods also become open source as well.” See: http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Mod_%28computer_gaming%29. Last visited 15 Dec. 04.

engine and it is free, but one can question the non-commercial motive of its developers. A similar case can be made with the original Counter-Strike. This total conversion started as any other mod, but after its success it was "bought back" by Valve Software, the developer of the Half-Life engine and Counter-Strike has been for sale ever since. Does this make Counter-Strike a game or will it ever stay a mod? With initiatives like the MSU Contest and online content platforms such as Steam, the commodification of mods has never been easier.

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