

Player created content: The ups and downs.

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Abstract

Player created content is the means through which a gamer can add their own imagination into a game. At the start gamers where content with creating new maps for their games but nowadays players are rivalling game developers in the creation of characters, levels and even the storyline of some games. Why do the companies allow their games do be modified in such a way? Why do gamers want to change their favourite games? Since gamers have been able to modify their favourite games the shelf life of some games have been extended years beyond what was believed of them. A community has arisen out of the innovative mods out there exchanging player created content to enrich other peoples gaming experience. Gaming companies search for new talent based on the strength of the mods circulating the web and some companies are now creating games with the knowledge that gamers will take them and create imaginative mods for them. Creative gamers have now got the chance to get their ideas out there and possibly get a job. This paper will not only look at the positive aspects of player created content but also at the negative aspects of mods such the risk they pose to a games reputation if a socially unacceptable mod comes out as well as the complications a mod might cause if not structurally sound. Player created content is too much a part of games and therefore will never go away.

Introduction

“Player-created additions to computer games aren't a hobby anymore -- they're the lifeblood of the industry.” (Wagner James Au 2002)

This paper will talk about the input from gamers, the content they create for their favourite games and the problems that can arise from such input. Everyone has their own opinion on what a good game is and how it can be improved upon, we have all played a game and wished for something different whether it be to change the look of a game or alter the storyline. Some games already have ways for players to create their own content such as map editors but with programming knowledge this increases what they are capable of. Through modification or mods as it is known a game can be changed completely. A mod is created by developers but now many are done by the public, they can extend the shelf life of a game as to play mods, the original game the mod was created for must be purchased first. Mods create everything from new weapons, characters or enemies to storylines and game modes. PC games are built with modification in mind a game can only be played by someone so many times before it becomes stale, with mods the player is introduced to new challenges and their interest in the game is held for longer.

Strengths

The modding community produces skilled programmers, animators and modellers as the software for this is easily available through open source, purchase or less legal ways. The ability to create anything you can think of in any of your favourite games allows the public to express themselves through a different media. People playing a game may want to see something done a

different way while another just wants to have something funny running about the screen all of this is achieved through mods giving the player an enhanced gaming experience. The fact you can exchange these mods through the internet gives the player the possibility to extend the play of a favourite game of theirs. Although they have taken someone's creation and modified it, it shows that the player only wishes to improve upon something they enjoyed in the first place. Anyone can download the mod and play it but in order for them to play it they must have bought the original game.

"In return for allowing mods to be created and exchanged, id simply requested that fans modify only the registered version of "Doom" -- not the freeware version. Almost all modders abided by this request; many even incorporated elements in their mods that prevented their use in the freeware version of "Doom." Not only did this tradition of communal self-policing create a bond between id and their best fans, it benefited the company commercially -- to enjoy all the free fan-created content now coming available, you first had to pay your toll to id and Apogee." (Wagner James Au 2002)

This is why gaming companies are looking to the modding community as a way to extend the shelf life of some of their games. The gaming company can make a lot of money from little input by showing the modding community some respect they were rewarded by some individual making mods inclusive to their official game.

"Modders were responsible for extending the shelf-life of 'Half-Life' years beyond what it would normally have been" (Paul Hyman interviewing Dan Morris 2004).

The game 'Half Life' saw its sales go up year after year in its first three years a number of mods were reasonable for this most notably the one know as 'Counter Strike' this mod became so popular that people starting playing this more than 'Half Life' but to play it they had to first purchase the game 'Half Life'. Here we see why it is in the interest of a gaming company to encourage modding and why the companies that do are now making game with modders in mind. Not only has modding extended the shelf life of the game but with a successful enough mod the popularity will return loyal gamers and hopefully bring in new customers.

Counter Strike has become so successful and popular that it has spawned its own game moving from PC to console so anyone can enjoy it. With this knowledge 'Half Life 2' developer Valve Software started informing modders about the code in the game before it was even out. They had seen the success of the mods from the previous game so with cunning foresight they have used the mods intelligently to create its own game and subsequently make the company a lot of money for little outlay.

Weakness

Although modding is a great thing it does have its problems. There are those who are still learning how to mod and those that know how to exploit it. Many people would want to change how a game looks and feels and now that gaming companies see the potential in modding they have started to allow access to the gaming code as well as creating modding software for their game, however there are still a lot of companies who do not wish external interference with their game code. Those who wish to modify their game must either buy expensive software - such as Maya for

the 3d modelling or Photoshop to change textures –or download it illegally and although in the gaming community people turn a blind eye it is wrong, it is stealing.

When a company does give access to the public the creative input from a wider spectrum of ideas can really enhance a games popularity or like the 'City of Heroes' creators found out easily abused. Paragon Studios recently introduced a Mission Architect system in to the Game 'City of Heroes' which allowed players to create their own missions. Within one day of release this players had created more content for the game than the developers had made in the entire life of the game. However when looking at the created content Paragon Studios found that players had made levels well suited to their characters. These players could run through a mission and gain around twenty levels because the enemies they had created for the mission although appearing strong were actually made with an easily exploited weakness to the player's character.

"If you don't plan carefully, there are players out there that will happily use your mechanic in a way it wasn't intended to be used and find new and creative ways to abuse the system" (Martuk 2009).

The company went about trying to fix what had happened by removing awards players had earned as well as banning the use of characters that were solely levelled up in the missions. They have now banned access to missions that exploit the system and all of this has heated up discussions in the forums. Without careful planning the company have upset their customers by not announcing the actions that would be taken if the system was exploited like this.

Another way that modding can be a problem is through weak modders. Although many are still learning how to do all this and are practicing their skill, players who have downloaded the mods they create can be exposed to unintended consequences. 'The Sims 2' had a huge exchange area where players could swap anything with each other however what they didn't know was that they were also swapping code which changed gameplay. The mods never told the user that they weren't made by Electronic Arts (EA),

"no-one expected these patches to override the game's default features and be transmitted through the exchange" (Will Knight 2005).

Although it was not intended this caused gamers some problems and forced EA to solve how to get the game working properly again. Afterwards people were alerted to the fact that what they were downloading was not of official content. Even though this wasn't intended it did reveal the possibility that mods could be used to damage player's games or computers.

"With multiplayer games, there is also a distinct danger that users will be able to create mods that dramatically tilt the competition in their favour" (Jason Smith 2005).

As before there are those that will exploit the system with a certain amount of knowhow someone can create a mod that will automatically target an opponent or make all walls invisible. These mods can easily be downloaded by anyone and used to cheat and shift the balance in a game. Although with these there is no challenge it would also cause people to stop playing the game, this has cause an entire industry to start up with the sole goal of stopping people using mods to cheat. A company named PunkBuster has lead the way for online anti cheating systems it is there to protect the honest player. They scan a player's computer looking for known hacks and cheats and if found the player can be removed from the game or permanently banned.

Sometimes people unintentionally cause problems when they had no intention of doing so. Patrick Widenborg searched through the code of GTA 4 and found a segment which was never meant to be found. There are people with the skill and knowledge to do this, which is why a gaming company has to be careful of what they leave in a game even if it was never meant to be seen. Although few gamers knew about the 'Hot Coffee Mod' as it was called it wasn't until it was reported that this mod existed that people took an interest in it, in fact the number of downloads of the mod increased. The hot coffee mod allows the player to have sex with their girlfriend although the concept of the material was of a mature nature all you really saw was, "an animation at about the level of a Ken doll rubbing up against an unclothed Barbie doll "(Frank 2005).

In response to the 'Hot Coffee Mod' a class action suit was filed against the publisher 'Take Two'. However out of the millions that bought the game less than 2, 700 filed with the suit which showed how much people actually cared about the mod. 'Take Two had to pay legal fees and donate a large sum to charity but the people who filed with the suit only got about five to thirty five US dollars.

People and Society

"first to affirm player's intellectual property rights in the digital creations" (Herman et al 2006)

In the online virtual world of 'Second Life' (SL for short) it is possible to make virtual money called Linden dollars then convert it into US dollars at a rate of 250 to 1. To earn the Linden dollars the players can acquire a job, buy property and rent it out or modify the game in some way. If someone is good at 3d modelling, programming or at using any of the drawing packages such as Photoshop they have the potential to earn quite a bit of money. With the 3d modelling knowledge a player can create new avatars to sell or even design buildings and since there are many companies actually in the virtual world of SL they would be willing to spend the money on an attractive property. In SL the game is all about fashion and looking good people play the game to escape the real world and this is where artist players come in they can design everything from new textures for clothes to the wallpaper in office buildings as well as designs for tattoos. With a combination of 3d modelling skill and artistic design then the player could do anything. However with programming the player can do anything as SL scripting controls everything from how the avatars moves to how objects work "Programmers bring SL to life with animation and functionality"(ChickJunk 2006). Anshe Chung is the first millionaire in 'Second Life' by which I mean her virtual empire is so vast that if she wished she could convert her virtual savings and have one million US dollars in real cash.

"the fortune was developed over a period of two and a half years from an initial investment of \$9.95 for a Second Life account" (Rob Hof 2006)

Anshe Chung started as a property baroness but has now started her own real life company that creates 3D environments and communities as well as helping people earn money through SL. Today people are now trying to earn money through their hobby of modding but there is a major problem when it comes to ownership.

"in most current-day license agreements for games, the publisher makes clear that all modified game materials will be considered property of the publisher"(Brian Douglas 2008).

Even though the person put their time and effort into making a mod that gave the game some new material, they have no claim to it and are not allowed to make money from it. If they tried to sell it, it would be as if they pirated the game. It is not usually a single person creating this mod but an entire team yet they receive no compensation for their input. However people are now beginning to see the potential of earning money through modding and although it is a small income they can make some money. The modding community finds it hard to make an income as the original game developers don't want the competition so with EULA backing they can stop mods making a profit, but EULA can't stop modders selling the bandwidth of downloading the mod. By charging access to the mod the group that made it can earn a little income. Another way the modding community makes money off their mods is to make a website dedicated to their creations and sell advertising space on the pages. Although many companies stop modders making a profit there are a few that encourage it,

"The Microsoft Flight Simulator community has been retailing planes and other mods for years" (Derek Warner 2006).

People have been making planes and textures for the game then selling them off; some groups have even managed to make quite a successive business from it. With more money they have created better quality models as well as realistic sound to create more immersive gameplay. Unreal have released a free version of their 'Unreal Engine 3' so people can create their own games release them and not have to pay anything unless they make over five thousand US dollars. The idea behind this is,

"We get them hooked on our technology and hopefully, when they build games or get a job in the game industry they are going to use Unreal Engine 3." (Colin Campbell interviewing Mark Rein 2010).

Unreal also had a competition sponsored by Intel which ran from April 2008 to Autumn 2009. The "\$1 Million Intel Make Something Unreal" had a lot of entries; the goal was to create a game using the unreal engine. Epic has organized three events like this all with modders in mind. Through these competitions Epic can find new talent for the game industry that might never have been discovered. Nowadays thanks to Epic and their free Unreal Development Kit (UDK for short) people are making commercial games and major companies are using the UDK for prototypes before getting a license.

"MOD development is better in a lot of ways of both honing your skills and demonstrating your talent to a potential employer than work experience" (David Perry interviewing Gabe Newell 2008).

Everyone has their own idea about what makes a game a good game and once they have played the game and have completed it they have thought about ways of improving it, some wish to change the textures in a game or play as their own character while others want to change the gameplay entirely. This has developed into a community where people create mods exchange them and then have more interesting and imaginative games to play. The gaming industry has caught on to this and sees this as a great way to discover new talent. People or groups that made these mods to further their own gaming experience or made them just as a hobby can now use them as a way to get into the industry as a games developer.

“Keranen, Carlson and many more would be hired by game companies largely on the strength of their mods” (Wagner James Au 2002).

Wagner James Au is talking about Rich Carlson an independent developer and veteran level designer as well as likka Keranen, a Finnish modder who now designs levels for Valve.

However this all depends on the quality of their mod or how innovative it is (*if it's even interesting*), the best way they can find this out is through feedback from players. The modding community helps with this as word spreads more people will download the mod play it then comment on it and then the modder can improve upon their creation if they have to. If the modder can create good quality mods which people enjoy to play then this could be the key to their career as a games developer. With feedback from gamers people can show their skill off to potential employers and possibly get their foot in the door. The modding community produces highly trained programmers, 3d artists and animators who have practiced on their own time to build up their skill. All of these skills are essential in making a game and the gaming companies use the modding community to find employees.

“At one point in time half our company was made up of people from the mod community “(Mark Rein).

The modding community has an added appeal to a gaming company as they don't need to spend a lot of money on hiring teachers or on training facilities to teach people all of these skills. The company also doesn't have to spend any money on the expensive software needed to train modders up as most will have been using pirated copies at home or have their own legit copies. Modders can be hired on the quality of their mods not their experience or contacts in the industry. All of this is done over the web so it doesn't matter who you are, as long as you can produce good quality mods there is always the potential for employment as a games developer.

People in the modding community do not have to work to the same guidelines as gaming companies. Their creativity is not restricted and they are not held back by legal concerns meaning they can do whatever they want, although this might cause problems it does mean that their mods will be more noticeable even if for the wrong reasons. Companies may be threatened by this as their game will obviously be associated with the mod but it will show the skill of the modder. With many unsavoury mods gamers aren't really affected by them they will continue to play them, it is not until someone complains, then there is an outcry and then action is taken against the developers.

Conclusion

There is no denying that through mods there is the potential for a games' shelf life to be extended way beyond what was initially expected of it. The gamer's interest is held longer because the game has something new and fresh. With access to the code the public is creating mods which mean there will always be something new and exciting to try which will assist in prolonging the life expectancy of the game. Half Life's mod Counter Strike was so popular gamers were telling their friends to buy the game just to play that mod. The company made money with little investment and when the player finished with Counter Strike they could play the original game or even create their own mods for it. Gamers have a chance to use their imagination and create something that they might never have got a chance to do. The modding community will help newcomers and give

feedback on the mods they create improving the skill of the modder. The fact companies are seeing the potential in mods as a way to not only increase game sales but to find new talent means anyone can become a games developer it all depends on your talent and creativity not your work experience.

However with anything new there are those who will abuse it. People have used mods to cheat, especially in multiplayer games meaning an entire industry has been built up to stop gamers using such mods and to even out the playing field once again. The Sims 2 exchange showed that mods could possibly be used for harming others computers or someone's gaming experience. The public have created many imaginative and innovative mods; it is through modding that new games developers are trained and discovered. Games are being designed with the modding community in mind but without proper planning there are those who can and will abuse this creative system. Player created content will never go away despite how some abuse it is responsible for too many great gaming ideas and job opportunities.

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