

## Playing It My Way? Mapping The Modder Agency

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### Introduction

The intention of this article is to take a critical look at gamer-made designs and especially mods, user-created modifications of popular game titles. Although gamer-made modifications have become a popular example both in new media literature (Lister & al., 2003) and game design writings (Salen & Zimmerman, 2003) so far the actual meanings modders themselves attach to their actions remain heavily under-researched. It is symptomatic that popular characterizations often draw from other media. The special theme issue of game magazine *Edge* from the summer of 2003 gave an illustrative example of this when they stated that “[m]odding is the electronic entertainment industry equivalent of a four-track recorder, or an affordable digital video camera; mod teams are the garage bands of gaming.” I agree that the ways modders create fresh ideas through experimenting with technologies clearly hold some similarity to the tactics applied by indie bands and bedroom djs. Eager embrace of do-it-yourself mentality connects modding with earlier participatory subcultures that have striven to remove distinctions between artist-producers and audiences (see also Salen & Zimmerman 2003, 559). Still, these parallels can lead astray. The independent music labels, or say independent film scene provide alternative contents via alternative distribution channels but so far the gaming culture has mostly failed to create corresponding structures. Few indie game projects actually end up with a publishing contract. Therefore modders who voluntarily co-operate with the game industry are worth examining, not only because the modder culture is a fascinating subject of study in its own right but because they offer a telling example of the contemporary overlap between media consumption and production.

‘Mod’ is originally short for ‘modify’ or ‘modification’ and usually refers to gamer-made alterations to a pre-existing games. ‘Modders’ redesign and improve their favourite games by tinkering with the code. Game development kits are often released with commercial PC games but modders also create tools of their own. Theoretically speaking, every little alteration made to the program code of any commercial entertainment software, can be treated as a mod and therefore there is no easy way to identify a single starting point for modding phenomenon as known today. It is obvious that various forms of playing and gaming - not only digital - are open to alterations, thematic transformations and reworking of rules. All kinds of games have room for the movement of free play and therefore players are able to bend and transform existing

games into new shapes (Salen & Zimmerman, 2003, 565). Besides owing a lot to earlier game forms, digital games can also be considered as advanced computer systems open to code-based manipulating and reprogramming. The urge to modify existing computer systems can be tracked at least back to the first generation hackers who treated the early machines as they were toys and were responsible for programming some of the first modern computer games. Early computer games were important vehicles for learning about programming and understanding the potentials of the machines. In a sense modifying games was an organic part of gamer lifeworld in the early days of computer gaming. (Haddon 1988, Sotamaa 2005.) Still, the mod phenomenon as known today is tightly connected to the emergence of online PC gaming in the early 1990's. Games like Doom (ID, 1993) introduced both new forms of network-based play and clever ways of supporting the gamer-made content creation. Simultaneously, the increasing access to the Internet and the emergence of World Wide Web gave birth to devoted fan groups. It can be argued that during the past ten years, online gaming and gamer-made modifications have become PC games' biggest assets in the struggle against ever-expanding console market.

Early academic accounts on gamer-made designs highlight the artistic dimensions of "game patches". Schleiner defines mods as "hacker art" and seeks "interventions that offer an unexpected perversion of the accepted semiotics of game worlds and game play" (Schleiner 1999). Elsewhere, gamer- and artist-made modifications have been suggested to follow political photomontages and scratch video as a manifestation of "tactical media" (Huhtamo 1999). These accounts position mods in clear opposition with the products of corporate media culture and propose them to be a new way of talking back to, revealing the means of and questioning the truths of mainstream media. The obvious strength of these approaches lies in their ambition to sketch a historical context for a phenomenon so enthusiastically celebrated as something completely new and revolutionary. On the other hand, what they mostly fail to see is the deeply contradictory nature computer games hold as popular cultural objects. What my research data suggests is that a noteworthy share of the game add-ons are not solely subversive and can hardly be interpreted as highly intellectual resistance of corporate media dynamics. As Stuart Hall (1981) suggests, popular culture is neither wholly corrupt nor wholly authentic, but popular reception contains both "progressive elements and stone-age elements." Following this line of thought, the central objective of this article is not to celebrate a new art form or portray modders as a new generation of cultural radicals but to examine the often contradictory everyday accounts modders produce as particular kind of fans of popular culture. While theories of fan culture provide a good starting point for analysis of mod maker actions and pleasures the article indicates that there is a need for new critical approaches capable of bridging the study of individual gamers and game industry initiatives.

### 3. Background and overview of the case study

Operation Flashpoint (OFP) modder community was chosen to be the object of study for several reasons. Although Operation Flashpoint has been both a critical and commercial success, OFP mod scene has not received similar attention as some other modder-friendly games. One of the interesting things in OFP is that it is developed by a relatively small Czech studio called Bohemia Interactive (BI). Focusing on one single title has enabled BI development team to support emerging mod culture in such ways the game industry giants tied to tight schedules can seldom afford.

OFP was released in 2001 and rapidly became the No. 1 selling computer game in several countries. Official expansion packs Operation Flashpoint Gold Edition (2001) and Operation Flashpoint Resistance (2002) were soon released to introduce new characters, storylines and gameplay options. Simultaneously the development team continued to support gamers by offering content upgrades and patches over the Internet. Soon BI released some of their developer tools, first to a chosen group of individual hobbyists and later openly in the Internet. Since 2001 BI has also hosted an active web forum where gamers, modders and development team members discuss issues related to the game.

Operation Flashpoint can be categorized as a military shooter simulation. It uses the first-person point of perception but differs from the typical representatives of FPS genre in several perspectives. Fast-paced "in-your-face combat" is replaced by very large game worlds and often the enemies are engaged at very long ranges. Co-operation is invariably appreciated over individual heroics. Although the frame story is fictional, the game reviews often celebrate OFP's ability to create "the realistic illusion of being in the middle of a full-blown war". The "realism" of the game is based more on the open gameplay schema than on the detailed graphics. The game is able to support different playing styles and often there are different ways to carry out the assignments.

When starting the actual research project I contacted one of the moderators of the official Operation Flashpoint forum and asked whether it was possible to publish an open invitation to participate in our study in the forum. . In addition, I asked if he was available to "beta-test" the questions in order to find they were actually relevant from a modder perspective. Once the invitation was posted to the forum I found it important to clarify the general goals of the research. To deliver some background information for the potential participants the invitation message had a link to the website that included some basic information on myself and related research at the institution I represent. In order to produce a mutual relationship with the participants I also promised to present some central findings later on the forum.

Instead of posting the questions to the forum I asked the ones interested in participating the research to contact me via email. The questions were sent to the participants via email and they focused on the following issues: origins of a personal modder career, general views on the OFP mod community and the diversity and quality of user-created content, skills used and learned, contacts and collaboration with other modders, opinions on the workings and support of the game developer. In the following three weeks I received answers from 23 OFP modders in total. The participants were all male with ages varying from 15 to 40 (average age 23). They represented 13 different nationalities and a variety of backgrounds. Approximately half of the participants were students while the other half included for example a couple of programmers, an artist, a tradesman and a doctor of physics.

In addition to the participants I succeeded to recruit via the official forum I contacted a Finnish mod team. Originally, I had an idea to interview them face to face since I was not absolutely sure how the email interviews would succeed. In the end the modders mostly preferred an email interview and I ended up doing only one interview face to face. Still, this alternative approach was valuable since now that I had six members of the same project team I was able to get more detailed information on the daily practices, different roles inside a team and the ways of co-operation

In the first phase I reserved a couple of weeks for going through the materials and after that I posted some early considerations to the forum. I also included a couple of further questions to the post to be discussed on the forum. Simultaneously I sent more focused personal questions to 9 participants chosen from the first phase participants. 7 of them replied, answers varying in length from a couple of words per question to a few pages as a whole. During the interview period and also afterwards I visited various web sites presenting the works of different participants. Sometimes the modders also referred to discussions and particular threads on the forums. Thus, eventually the interviews had to be analysed in close relation to earlier and simultaneous discussions in the editor websites.

#### 4. Modders as fans and beyond

Elsewhere (Sotamaa 2003) I have argued that the tradition of fan culture theory can significantly inform the research of mod making phenomenon. It is clear that avid gamers share characteristics with fans of other media texts. Consalvo lists several similarities between gamers and television fans ranging from the sophisticated understanding of the text and its relations to other texts to creating websites and fan fiction (Consalvo 2003, 326-327). Furthermore, modders who rework and develop further the products of game industry hold a particular position among the game fans.

Since “game fans” seem to come in many forms it would be tempting to apply the continuum of fan identities introduced by Abercrombie & Longhurst. By analysing the skills and forms of productivity among enthusiastic television audiences they make a distinction between ‘fan’, ‘cultist’, ‘enthusiast’ and ‘petty producer’. While most of the fans incorporate forms of textual productivity, the work of a petty producer is no more limited to the fan community but “begins to be increasingly directed towards an anonymous market, where the consumers of the goods can only be imagined” (Abercrombie & Longhurst 1998, 150). This definition clearly has some similarity to popular mods that are celebrated and played by masses of gamers. In the following I discuss some of the challenges that placing mod makers into this continuum of fan identities produces. I suggest this dialogue can assist in understanding the motivations and strategies behind modder actions. At the same time, earlier research on fans offers a useful point of comparison that can highlight important differences and clarify the particularity of mod culture.

First of all, the way Abercrombie & Longhurst organize the spectrum of identities appears to be - at least partly - hierarchical. Naming modders ‘the petty producers of game culture’ comes therefore close to saying that mod making is the highest condition of creativity one can reach among computer games. This is very problematic, since my intention as a researcher is not to value the research subjects or list some sort of order of superiority. Instead, I find it more important to examine in detail both the actual modder perceptions concerning issues of identity, co-operation and hierarchy and the conditions that generate these notions. Still, the approach highlights the importance of further studies examining for example the relations of modders and independent game developers.

Secondly, it seems that the devoted following is not only attached to the products of commercial game industry but popular mods as well can become objects of fan enthusiasm. Based on my data the fans of particular mods do not only praise and celebrate the mod productions but actively offer their ideas and even demand new features. As one of the participants puts it: “[t]he things that frustrate me the most are non-constructive critique and the impatient ‘fans’” (OFP24). My intention here is not to claim that fan productions that gain fan following of their own are a completely new phenomenon but to illustrate the limitations of such classifications that focus merely on the relationship between the original game text and an individual game fan.

Thirdly, modders themselves are far from a homogeneous group. In case of Operation Flashpoint they can be roughly divided into three different categories: mission makers, add-on makers and mod makers. Clearly, these categories are overlapping and not fixed, but they help to give an overview on the organization of different actors among OFP modder scene.

Based on the interviews the most common way to begin OFP modding is fiddling with the in-game mission editor. In the beginning one picks from the five available islands and starts to construct an assignment from the given selection of objects and properties. Although the editor is basically the same tool BIS used to create the original complex missions it is quite easy to use and units and objects can be added to the map with a few clicks of the mouse. While the combinations created in the mission editor are unique, they still consist of pre-existing elements. This limitation often inspires gamers to experiment with add-ons.

It was through the mission editor I got into making addons. [---] However, you can't make missions without addons, and this one team had a shortage of addon makers. It wasn't long before I downloaded o2 and started making stuff. [---] A mod is the greatest undertaking a team can make. Within that are encompassed all the other types of things that are in OFP, and you can really make something unique and special with a mod. (OFP13)

Add-ons can range from single objects like plants and buildings to operational vehicles and weapons, modified squads and complete islands. Compared to mission making, add-ons typically demand more working phases and more specialized tools. Single add-ons are often collected to a theme-based add-on pack to ease downloading. In context of OFP a 'mod' mostly equals a thematic combination of missions and add-ons. In more general connections modders may use the term 'total conversion'. When the missions form together a continuous plot a mod is said to include a 'campaign'.

Again, it is important to bear in mind that the categories do not follow any simple hierarchy. Not all hobbyists set their sights to making ambitious mods but many are more than happy to develop their skills as innovative mission makers. Several of the most appreciated coalitions inside OFP community are not working on mods but on add-ons and add-on packs. Thus, the number of operational OFP mod teams and completed mod projects is actually quite modest. This is easy to understand when one looks at the amount of work force needed for an average project. While a single add-on - for example a 3d model of a particular vehicle - can be implemented by a single "lone wolf modder", mod projects demand a lot of time and a variety of different skills and therefore typically employ several people.

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

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

The staff listings of mod team web sites mostly follow the same pattern. Typically experts of different areas (scripting, config coding, modeling, texturing, interface design, animation, sounds and music, web design) are gathered together by project leader(s). Some people specialize in documentation and tool development while others focus on beta testing different versions. Looking only at listings may give an impression of well-defined roles and

structured organization. One cannot miss the similarity of these descriptions in relation to the ones used by game industry. However, the everyday reality can still be a bit different:

The roles in this project have been quite unsteady. The only thing I haven't touched are the scripts. [---] Basically almost everyone has freely worked on other people's branches and you can't speak of such clearly defined assignments and duties as they probably have in IT companies. The matters are discussed in IRC every evening. (OFP 26)

Furthermore, the core team is often supplemented with "collaborative members". Mostly this means independent add-on makers that donate their add-ons to mod teams in order to get more attention to their work.

So far, it is clear that an impressive variety of skills is needed in completing a single mod for Operation Flashpoint. In the early days of hacking and game development the actual work was almost entirely programming-oriented, whereas during the 90's a division of modders into different roles started to emerge. For example with Doom (1993) the media files were separated from the main program and made accessible for users. One of the consequences was that a breed of modders with new kinds of skills and motivations started to appear. (Laukkanen 2005) Under these circumstances I suggest that another way to group modders based on the research data is to look at the skills participants found useful in their personal projects. The interesting thing here is that the earlier skills and hobbies seem to be tightly connected to the entire motivation. In other words, this approach helps us to reveal the variety of approaches and to consider mod making as part of their larger lives:

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

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

When making add-ons you can make good use of your knowledge, whether you were a history freak, a miniature modeller, a boater or a more into outdoors activities and wildlife. The beauty of the OFP game engine is based on the fact that experiences from so many different areas can be capitalized in seeking realism and fun. (OFP26)

In order to clarify the motivational factors I attempt to identify some central approaches in the following. Although the classification is based on the research data collected among OFP modders, I suggest these approaches can be identified among other games as well. The grouping is intentionally based on actions, not on actors, since a single modder may hold several of these standpoints simultaneously. The categories are as follows:

#### a) Playing

I enjoyed the game, then got into internet community and tried to develop my own things, because the game seemed to be kinda "incomplete" or I had idea I desperately needed to put working into game :) (OFP1)

Often the original motivation is based on the challenge whether one is able to improve and personalize the gaming experience him/herself. According to the interviews the like-minded

mod teammates were often found via playing with or against them. Correspondingly modding can in a long run change the nature of gaming:

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

#### b) Hacking

It was probably the pure interest in the way Flashpoint "works". [---] I've always been interested in studying how different things work, already as a kid I had to take all the toys to pieces. [---] Especially in the early days of OFP it was interesting since everything was unknown and a big part of the process was to discover the ways to implement your ideas. (OFP24)

The relationship between games and the emergence of personal computing is strong and complex. Early hackers and home computer hobbyists who saw programming mainly as playing and experimenting are at least partly responsible for many innovations that form the basis of our contemporary highly computerized and networked society. In a way modding can be seen as a contemporary game cultural manifestation of the "hacker legacy": advanced modder knowledge is not acquired through formal education but by playing with the code. As we see later, the "hacker ethic" is also clearly visible when negotiating the ownership and fair use of mods.

#### c) Researching

Some products are quite mature, made by technicians and/or soldiers (or military fans) who spend more time gathering information sources than actually building addons and missions. (OFP1)

If hackers enthusiastically examine the details of the code, a research-oriented modder wants to clarify the background and the details of the subject matter. In case of OFP this can mean anything from a piece of historical information to a clear picture of the object to be modelled. In order to collect this information OFP modders may contact for example military collectors or army surplus shopkeepers. The following participant quotation gives a hint of the dedication and "seriousness" involved in the mod projects.

The other major factor is the significant involvement of experienced military personnel from many countries. You have Russian soldiers advising the designing of graphical and coding details of Soviet-era armor, US ex-special forces people contributing to special ops addons, and so on. (OFP4)

Those familiar with Banks' work on railroad simulation Trainz, will immediately see the similarity between these specialists, and the ways how the railway enthusiasts were able to produce outstanding digital replica models based on their knowledge and passion on railroad and particular locomotives (Banks 2003). Interestingly this also reveals something significant from the nature of the game: even if there clearly is some similarity to average shooter games in the

level of audiovisual appearance, based on the ethos of modders OFP should be treated as a simulation, much in the spirit of flight simulators.

#### d) Artistic work

The best thing in modding is the experience of creation, it's like painting a picture. (OFP27)  
More or less every modder uses the game as a medium of expression. The motivation can vary from purely aesthetic to a more political one. Several of the participants were eager to emphasize the superiority of OFP design and the diversity of possibilities it offers.

There is great diversity in OFP mods - the open design and game scheme allows people to make WWI era addons as well as "GTA-style" mods, add units and scenarios from almost any battlefield of 20th and 21st century. (OFP1)

However, compared to mods of such popular FPS games as Quake III Arena or Half-Life, OFP modifications seem to be notably faithful to the quest for realism introduced by the original game. Occasional mod projects - like Legawarz (Lego figures and bricks) and Operation Sci-Fi (Star Wars) - with a reference to other media cultural texts exist but they remain in a minority. The more one examines the modder forum discussions the more clear it becomes that a detailed study of real-life objects precedes the making of majority of gamer-made add-ons.

#### e) Co-operation

Well, it is great hobby in which I have met some really nice people. I have found some new friends, some from my country, some from abroad. I enjoy the feeling that I made something for others, they appreciate it and enjoy the stuff. (OFP1)

In brief I would say that the most enjoyable part of modding has been the co-operation and the creation of ideas with other team members and the enthusiasm to work towards a shared goal. (OFP26)

For some people visiting the forums and participating the mod projects is primarily a way to find other similar minded people and transcend alienation (Postigo 2003, 601). The larger the mod project the clearer it is that some sort of social skills are needed.

'Co-operation' is closely related to the idea of having or not having "a community". In the following I will briefly take a look at the community issues among the OFP mod makers.

### 5. On Co-operation and Community

While all definitions of 'fan' tend to be more or less problematic it seems clear that one central characteristic of fandom is the active sharing of meanings and texts created. The objects of fandom and the ways of expressing ones enthusiasm are discussed and negotiated continuously with other fans. One of the characteristics Matt Hills associates with fan cultures is that they "construct hierarchical forms of internal and external cultural distinction / difference while

preserving ideals of the 'fan community' ". (Hills 2002, 182) I suggest, this contradictory description offers an interesting starting point for the closer examination of the OFP community aspects. As explained above, mod makers construct more or less dynamic hierarchies that can be used to give a preliminary picture of the field. At the same time strong bonds are created through sharing ones knowledge and co-operating with other committed fans.

Examining some popular OFP online forums reveals clearly the dedication of modders. The most active members have sent hundreds or even thousands of messages to the forums. And many of them seem to follow and participate on several forums. The term "ofp community" is regularly used on the forums. Sometimes one can also find expressions like "ofp editing community" that aim to distinguish modders from gamers that may download and play mods but do not participate in developing them. The participants often described OFP scene as more mature than other gamer communities. Some participants were eager to point out how this network of hobbyists is flexibly able to tolerate different positions and working practices:

The atmosphere I think is incredible. There are a number of rogue 'consultants' (like me) who fiddle with different components, and then other groups of people that combine on larger projects. (OFP4)

Advice concerning technical details is asked for and openly given on the forums. The forums are also used as a source of feedback: released beta versions are advertised in order to receive comments and bug reports. Furthermore, experienced modders write tutorials and publish them on their websites. The following answer reveals something of the various possibilities a mod maker has when in need of help:

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

Different mod projects often need similar objects and therefore it is no surprise that add-ons are often borrowed and lent, or sometimes even co-operatively created.

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

Not only is the co-operation visible between independent mod teams, but the whole international network of projects and individual modders seems to be able to agree on particular issues. The case of 'OFP Tags' reveals that hobbyists can actually be quite organized. OFP Tags were introduced in 2002 by Operation Flashpoint Editing Centre<sup>1</sup> (OFPEC) as a way of avoiding conflicts between different add-on and mission makers. OFPEC is an independent repository for OFP editing resources appreciated for its minute tutorials and for hosting a vast number of gamer-made projects. A tag is a three to five letter identifier that is individual to each designer.

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<sup>1</sup> <http://www.ofpec.com/>

Modified files and classes are marked with the tag so that other people are able to see what has been altered and by whom. Today, almost every respected member of the community has an individual tag: OFPEC lists almost 900 registered tags belonging either to teams or individual modders.

Modders themselves openly admit that the significantly international fan base has its benefits and problems. Alongside the happy co-operation, some rivalry and friction also exist between mod teams. To describe the big picture one of the participants writes:

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

Ambitious projects originate in numerous European countries, US, Canada, Australia, Russia, Japan, China and so on. While the "official" language on websites and Internet forums is however English, some modders feel unequal and misinterpretations tend to happen. Some teams have voluntarily shut themselves off the international co-operation and created active local forums where they operate by using their native language.

While the original game puts the player on the fictional Malden Islands, an area reminiscent of the Balkans, mods take the action all over the globe. While advanced use of the Internet enables teams and methods of co-operation be overtly global, the subject matters tend to be extraordinarily local. Several projects (SwissMod, Finnish Defence Forces) focus on constructing virtual representations of local environments and troops. Also projects focusing on particular historical events (Operation Gulf War Crisis, Battle over Hokkaido, 1982: Flashpoint in the Falklands) often have a national emphasis. Understandably these kinds of themes tend to open up openly political debates among mod makers. While the real-life cold war is agreed to be over, some of the attitudes are still alive in the virtual battlefields. A telling case discussed by many of the interviewees is The Joint Ammunition and Magazines project (JAM). The purpose of JAM was to make add-ons of different teams more compatible with each other by introducing a common set of values. The success of this attempt to standardise add-ons was quite modest since majority of the OFP mod teams never agreed to join the project. Many modders found the agreement too "Nato-friendly" and complained about the lack of fairness in several issues. Founders of the projects were described as "overbearing" and "contemptuous". On the other hand, members of the US-based group responsible for the proposal emphasized that they had actively sought input from everyone and were very disappointed for the lack of collaboration. In the following I move on from analysing the relationships inside modding community to discuss the relationship between modders and the game industry.

## 6. The Condition of Participatory Culture

In case of computer game mod culture it seems obvious that the networked PC has opened a variety of new possibilities and caused visible changes in the everyday fan activities. This is not to suggest an entirely deterministic viewpoint on digital technology, but more to admit the significant changes in the patterns of consumption, production and distribution. In examining the decentralization of "new media" Lister et al. (2003) point out that simultaneously as the computer-based production technologies and processes have emerged, the skills needed in media production have become more generally dispersed in the population. Building on Toffler's term they suggest that the approachable 'prosumer technologies' help to overcome the rigid separation between what is acceptable for public distribution and what is appropriate "only" for domestic exhibitions. (Lister et al. 2003, 30-34) However, in his recent critique of 'prosumer' Julian Kücklich (2005) has quite rightly stated that the potential of being simultaneously a consumer and a producer does not equal to being empowered since the right to distribute has become even more important than that to produce or reproduce. In this connection, it is important to highlight that traditionally fan activities were mainly discussed in conventions and copies of texts were circulated mainly inside the fan community. Today Internet is extensively used for bringing the global fan base together and for distributing the flux of fan materials.

One of the traditional claims of the fan critics is that fan cultural texts are not produced to make profit. However, the recent critique argues that the idea of participatory culture runs into difficulty precisely when discussing the development of once fan producers to semi-professional and professional producers and distributors.

Jenkins is uneasy with the potential reconfiguration of boundaries between fandom and official, commercial, corporate culture. This emerging dynamic does not fit easily within much of his placing fandom in an oppositional stance towards commercial culture. It does not sit easily within the frameworks of Cultural Studies' often all too predictable political posturing. The fans are fraternizing with the enemy or even going commercial themselves, what is to be done! (Banks 2003, 10)

It's clear that Jenkins's position is slightly overstated here but even so the critique succeeds in revealing that phenomena like mods go beyond the formulations of traditional fan theory. In his recent attempt to update some of the notions, Jenkins tries to clarify the contemporary intersections of participatory culture and corporation-driven media convergence. Alongside *conflict* or *critique* amateur works can also *challenge* the industry productions by competing for the same audiences. Various plans for the incorporation of viewer-generated materials introduce different modes of *collaboration* between audiences and professionals. Furthermore, amateur media is used as a training ground for emerging ideas and successful petty productions can lead to *recruitment* of the talented hobbyists. (Jenkins 2003.) In the following analysis we shall see how the formulations of Jenkins are both fulfilled and challenged among the interviewed OFP modders.

Game industry, characterized by rapid technological development, continuous search for new gimmicks and short market-life of products, has lately been of interest to the theorists of "post-industrial economy". As Postigo (2003) points out, the framework of "free labor" discussed in connection to digital economy by Terranova (2000) is useful also in context of computer game modifications. Terranova considers unwaged labor - work processes shifted from the factory to society - a significant force in advanced capitalist societies. The creation of value in digital economies is highly dependant on voluntary activities including participation in mailing lists and web forums, website building and modifying software packages. Still, free labor productions like mods are not solely about corporate powers incorporating and distributing fruits of subcultural projects but the relations between different actors are much more complex including both elements of gift economy and those of advanced capitalism. In this cultural situation the productive activities of skilled semiprofessionals are simultaneously embraced and exploited. (Terranova 2000, 33-39)

Viewed in this light, it is interesting to examine the ways modders themselves are able and willing to conceptualize the issues of ownership and the commercial potential of their work. It is symptomatic that musings concerning 'doing things for free' and 'not getting paid' are repeated over and over again in the interviews. As one of the participants writes:

I think the only thing that really causes friction is the continual argument between modders and the less grateful users who can't mod. The one about how modders do this *for free in their spare time* on the one side, and the other side which says that they are 'teasing people' or whatever else. I think the modders have the upper hand here though. *They really don't get paid for this*, and I think not enough people understand that. (OFP16)

In this connection the different definitions of "free" emerge. Since both copying add-ons from a modder site to one's hard drive and republishing them in one's own name is very simple sometimes straight-forward duplicating happens. The idea that something that is "free" can be "stolen" indicates that although seldom commercially exploited, OFP mods do have a value.

Insulting someone's hours spent making something to give away free, or outright stealing it, or insinuating that they stole it, has caused many threads to be lock and folks banned for this immaturity. This also demoralizes the mods, to the point that they decide to no longer create content, or to drop out of the game. (OFP4)

Following the participant comments I suggest that modders clearly follow competing tactics in this relation.

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

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

However, there are teenagers trying to become modding stars inside the community. BTW the development teams I worked/work for are made mostly of older (above 20) people, whose

aim is to create something they might play with, they apply kinda DIY philosophy on their work. (OFP1)

However, contrary to the notions above I suggest one should not consider the OFP mod scene as two entirely separated camps. Instead, the described "categories" can be seen as alternative approaches a single modder can apply in different times. If one looks at the approaches more closely, one can find elements familiar from parallel fields. First of all many groups seem to follow some sort of open source approach where the development work is seen more as communal project where individual developers and teams work toward a common goal. Reworking someone else's work is not regarded as "theft" but more as paying homage to a good job, as long as the author of the original is credited for his/her part.

A more open nature, where nobody gets angry when someone else re-uses your work, would greatly improve quantity and quality of add-ons. The process would end up in a natural selection of work, where only the best survive. (OFP15)

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

Thus, mod projects apply a structure very close to the idea of 'copyleft' introduced among free software developers. Copyleft is a general method for making a piece of code free and requiring all modified and extended versions of this code to be free software as well.<sup>2</sup> This interpretation of "free", referring more to freedom than price, is a positive one but also demanding: redistribution of the software, with or without changes, always includes the freedom to further copy and change it.

While the blurring of boundaries between work and leisure is neither a new phenomenon nor characteristic only to game cultures, the games industry seems particularly eager to discourage their audiences from associating games with boring realities as jobs and working hours. This is an industry that can clearly benefit from a perception that all the activities associated with games can be seen as play and therefore non-profit-oriented. (Kline et al. 2003, 197-217, Kücklich 2005.) As long as game industry can preserve the situation where mod makers are happy to work for free it can happily benefit from selling the retail titles gamers need to play the modifications. Not surprisingly, alternative ideas more favourable to the commercial aspects have emerged alongside the "free software model". As some of the modders wrote it:

The biggest shortage is the lack of organization. How quickly these enthusiastic talents could produce even commercial add-ons if only they were organized to work towards a shared goal. (OFP26)

Although I am currently very open minded about lending my work to others, I noticed that my point of view is changing. With the release of VBS1, the prospect of OFP2, and my work and knowledge getting more and more sophisticated, I am considering ways to partially commercialize my work. (OFP4b)

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<sup>2</sup> for more see "What is Copyleft?" at <http://www.gnu.org/copyleft/copyleft.html>

Some game developers have openly admitted that today mod projects are often used as a portfolio when applying a job in game industry. Based on my interviews, the attitudes on getting recruited varied a lot. Basically the younger hobbyists saw the opportunity more tempting. Paradoxically, the experienced modders who actually might have had a chance to acquire a job were more sceptical on the matter. Some participants of the study also claimed that modding hobby has inspired them to apply for a job outside game industry (programming, military intelligence etc.). However, although some informants were capable of perceiving the current structural disproportion between modders and the industry, and others had even been offered a job related to digital games, many still highlighted the benefits of leaving modding just a hobby.

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

That's the best thing in all this. It's only a hobby. If you don't want to do it, you don't have to. If you want to go out and have a beer you just go. No one will phone you that hey, now the mod is not completed. (OFP28)

I never wanted this hobby of mine to become a serious work - as I probably said before, modding is very relaxing and I do it just when I feel like to do it. I doubt my creations would have the same quality if I would be forced to produce certain amount of textures per day or so. (OFP6b)

## Conclusions

Given the forecasts that the significance of gamer-made content is estimated to grow substantially in the following years, I suggest this study can highlight some early findings likely to uncover potential future directions. However, it is important to recognize the diversity of mod cultures. What the article proposes is that there is no such thing as an average computer game modder. Still, turning to case studies allows us to discuss both a spectrum of contradictory modder identities and the different contexts that govern the production of them. In case of OFP, a preliminary division can be based on whether modders focus on making missions, add-ons or complete mods. Interest in modding often originates from playing the game but further motivations can range from hacking and researching to self-expression and community building. Furthermore, the potential commercialisation of hobbyist work is clearly drawing diverse reactions among mod makers.

My intent in this paper has been to take a look at meanings mod makers themselves attach to their projects and activities. In order to fully understand the frame where modders exercise their agency it would be crucial to identify the particular industrial context and explore the ways in which game industry supports and controls the modding phenomenon. We also need to continue to consider the relation of mod making to other forms of game cultural creativity. It

is also important to explore what kind of influence modding can have on the ways gamers make sense of games.

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