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Free Expression – The Emergence and Decline of Games Modding

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I declare that this **Critical Cultures Research Project** is all my own work and that all sources have been fully acknowledged.

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Table of Contents

List of Illustrations4

Introduction.....5

Chapter 18

Chapter 213

Chapter 3.....20

Conclusion.....24

Bibliography.....28

List of Illustrations

<i>Figure 1: Id Software, Ranger (1996). [game texture]. Quake game files.....</i>	<i>11</i>
<i>Figure 2: PMS-Sister and Dan Bickell, Bad Girl (1997). [game texture]. idgames2 Archive at Gamers.org.....</i>	<i>11</i>
<i>Figure 3: Concurrent Lifetime Players of Garry's Mod, according to SteamDB [graph].....</i>	<i>15</i>
<i>Figure 4: The public Steam Workshop page of 'Human Grunt'. [screenshot].....</i>	<i>17</i>
<i>Figure 5: An example of the Garry's Mod server browser [screenshot].....</i>	<i>19</i>

Introduction

In the context of video games, modding “is a term that is used among game players and in the game industry referring to payer-drive modification or transformation of a computer game” (Schleiner, 2017, p. 35). This research project aims to discuss and discuss the development of games modding and its effect on the game on the games industry, at least in the context of popular games, as well as the novel types of expression that comes from taking an otherwise complete piece of art, and being able to change the expression possible from it. This will argue that this mode of expression can bring out novel results, especially as modders, the term for those who make mods, tend to be outsiders to the industry, and can act in a more naïve way, especially in regards to their design intentions and copyright, often because they’re operating with limited skills and budget.

This thesis will be broken down into three chapters, which roughly track the development of a variety of games, and the modding communities and availabilities that opened up around them. Each chapter takes us forward through time, with the various differences in expression from the modders reliant on the games released and the general condition of games as a whole in that time. Although various games featuring modding are mentioned, the focus will mostly revolve around shooter games, since their lineage led to a fairly well known and documented modding scene, but will mention other genres of games that have had modding scenes grow. Other examples of games outside of shooters with modding include *The Sims* games series, rhythm games like *Beat Saber* and *Clone Hero*, which recreates *Guitar Hero* with more freedom to add new content, and many more.

The first chapter mostly focuses on the origins of easily shared mods in Id Software's shooter releases in the 1990s, and discusses the dialogue that can occur between modders and the developers of the games they mod for. This sort of dialogue is one of the aspects of modding that makes it unique in comparison to other mediums.

Chapter 2 discusses a game in particular which highlights modding at its full potential as a new creative force, *Garry's Mod*. It's history starting as a mod, which was elevated to the status of being its own unique sandbox platform, which more mods could be built off of. This chapter also discusses how copyright infringement in modding happens, and the unique elements that arise from that, from games being so open to being taken apart and remade in new ways.

Chapter 3 then concludes this discussion by discussing the reaction of large developers outside of the few that have shown support for modding and its potential, and how it has been pushed back against when the economic interests of the games industry in a post free-to-play monetisation economy. Why should games companies support a process that loses money from their bottom line, and fly in the face of intellectual property laws?

The aim for this discussion is to try gain insight into this influential and important part of games as a medium, and the intertwined relationship with the industry that makes the games for them to even modify in the first place. Modding is no longer as respected as it was in the gaming industry that it was even 20 years ago, yet it has persevered as a community in the PC gaming world. There even are some games which aren't recommended without mods that can correct bugs in the games original code, or remove problematic elements that have broken over time. With modding continuing to be side-lined in broader discussion, what are we losing? Should there not be a greater effort to understand and promote the skills that help people understand

how games are made, which have led to developers teaching themselves skills that have gotten them hired in games companies? As well as this, modding can expand the game and its value to players, so why not allow it to be spread and understood widely?

Chapter 1

A mod can vary in scope wildly in relation to how many elements, as well as the variety of systems and content that can be changed in the game. For example, common mods in older games would replace the textures of models, such as objects and characters, as well as editing code to be able to add new mechanics, or even make a new game on top of the existing game, known as a total conversion (Laukkanen, 2005). Modding communities have been a part of games culture primarily since the days of Id Software's *DOOM*, first released in 1993, which had the ability to load new maps, textures and sounds in their .WAD format (Schleiner, 2017), and has continued throughout a variety of games and game genres, including first person shooters broadly. This research will mostly focus on the history of modding in relation to first person shooters, as it's a genre that has a long history of modding communities, which continues to this day, which continues to influence modders, those who make mods, and the games industry broadly today.

Mods have an interesting intertwined history with their host games and the game industry as a whole. Valve, another developer that continued the quasi-tradition of allowing easy access for modders into their games systems, and giving access to their level design program, Hammer, and have even gone as far as to acquire both the modders as workers for them (Valve Corporation, 2011). Valve have repackaged acquired total conversion mods as games, notably *Counter-Strike*, *Team Fortress*, and *Portal*, and would later go on to release sequels developed with the modders now working as in-house developers.

Modding is important in the games industry as it allows a conversation between fans of games and their developers, using the language of game design and development. Anne-Marie

Schleiner discusses how even outside of Valve, the cross-pollination between modders and developers starts even before Valve first published a mod derived game. This approach is described by author Anne-Marie Schleiner as “the productive relation between modders and the game industry may at times be that of symbiosis, of reciprocal, circular, cultural gift-giving.” (2017, p. 37). An example of this relationship can be found in another Id Software game, *Quake*. The game shipped with only a selection of a male model for players to use when in multiplayer matches. With the user’s ability to mod the textures of the games main character, they could add in female characters, but only while using the same male mesh as the male default. This was accessible due to considerations on the side of the 3D artists in how they authored the in game model. Its texture mapping from 2D to 3D (UV mapping) was designed in such a way to allow people to open up the texture and clearly see how the in game characters 2D texture aligned with the 3D representation (Figure 1). These characters existed on and were often made by users of a forum called the Quake Women’s Forum, or QWF. Schleiner called these characters “frag queens” (Schleiner, 2017, p. 50), joking on the term ‘fragging’ from the community of death-match players, while making the connection between a form of queerness that appeared through this brute force attempt for women to be visible in a game space designed with men in mind. (Figure 2) Modding was necessary for the likes of the “frag queens” to even exist; the ability to have the game be open enough to peeking eyes to see how all these intricate systems were put together is a part of the affordances developers can make when designing for modding. Modding however, doesn’t necessitate the change that would allow a true democratisation of games and a direct say in how games are made. In relation to the “frag queens”, and where they went, Schleiner states:

“In an apparent response to the popularity of these player-made female skins, ... Id Software's inserted a female protagonist character option into their 1997 sequel game, Quake 2. ... Although Quake 2's new female fighters sported visible musculature, when viewed alongside Quake 1's brawny Frag Queens, Quake 2's character's slender curves conformed to more conventional womanly proportions. ... frag queens underwent a normalization into a more stereotypical conception of femininity.” (2017, p. 50)



Figure 1: The default character skin in *Quake*, the 'Ranger', showing it's very artist friendly approach to UV mapping (Quake, 1996)



Figure 2: “Bad Girl” skin, made by PMS-Sister, based on a skin base by Dan Bickell, an example of a ‘Frag Queen’ (1997)

While modding may be an open platform to anyone to create new content for a game they enjoy, it often falls under the same issues with limited perceived audiences, and those audience's biases that trickle down from the main game and games culture as a whole. Modding can and often does recreate existing ideas of who the audience for a game is, which can then further alienate those left outside the audience being marketed towards:

“At times, digital play material is only repeated as it moved through player modding and game industry spheres via the milieu of the internet. Gender and ethnic stereotypes are perpetuated. Games become formulaic, especially after numerous sequels and knock-offs that attempt to squeeze the most out of a publisher's franchise.” (Schleiner, 2017, p. 53)

The back and forth between developers and modders designing and marketing games with a straight white male view is a reflection of how the games industry is more comfortable advertising to that audience, often leaving out women, or viewing them in very limited ways to further cement that audience. (Behm-Morawitz, 2017). This is what makes the frag queens and the QWF an interesting case study in relation to modding, it's an exception to the myriad of other mods that existed for *Quake* and other first person shooters which were more geared towards a male audience and the male gaze. The QWF doesn't exist anymore, nor did they seem to maintain any visible updates to their website after 2000. It's understood now by the wider industry that while women play games, the genres they play in show segregation between genders (Kallio, Kaipainen and Mäyrä, 2007, p. 77-78), which is most likely a result of these decisions with audience. Modding and other forms of content creation weren't enough to upset this from occurring in the first person shooter, for women to be able to break the larger industry's idea of the audience for these games, and show that there's often not a holistic picture to be gained about people who play games from examining modding. It's important to note the thriving modding scene for the sims, which is a game with a much more balanced gender divide

between its fans, some reporting it having a female majority (Kallio, Kaipainen and Mäyrä, 2007, p. 78; Sihvonen, 2011, p. 22).

This back and forth of fan led designing and creating, and how it leads into future game development cycles, is a big positive for many modders, even regardless of the negative reinforcement of tropes around games and their audiences, but when examining this relationship, it's important to also ask if it is exploiting the free labour of your biggest fans? Schleiner examines this argument using the studies of Michel Serres and his concept of a Parasite. (1982, cited in Schleiner, 2017, p. 38) If modding is a form of Parasite attached on to the host body of games and the games industry, what sort of relationship do they share with one another? This would imply that modders may be a drain onto the industry, but the definition of a parasite is broader than that. The informational parasite is one that makes sense out of the noise of the host; here we've seen modders take a game and allow themselves to recontextualise it, change what playing the game means.

We've already seen more explicit versions of this parasitic relationship in relation to how Valve hired modders of their games to help them make games for them, using modding as a way to gain staff already versed in their code and tools, but what about when modders start acting in ways that don't suit the developer? Or when developers would rather that their players just don't mess with what they've made, and a modding community forms regardless?

Chapter 2

Garry's Mod (2006) is a mod-turned-game that is important when trying to discuss modding and modding communities, especially post in the 2010s. Created and named after Garry Newman, it was a mod for Valve's Half-Life 2. Its purpose was to use the modding tools allowed for Half-Life 2 and turn it into a more accessible platform to create, without the need for technical knowledge to create new experiences. First released in 2004 (and re-released in 2006 as a standalone release, under the same name), and developed consistently since then, it helped further popularise the sandbox game genre during the 2010s, riding on a resurgence in the genre thanks to Minecraft. Sandbox games provide themselves not to be a fixed experience curated by developers, but instead a game experience which is driven by the player's goals, and the game becomes a more flexible tool for players to play within, hence the 'sandbox' name; it's now a controlled area for play using digital tools. "It's a toolset, a playground for tinkering in Valve Software's Source Engine and one of the most successful gaming canvases ever released to the computer-playing public." (Totilo, 2010) *Garry's Mod* exposes the engine's internal systems, vehicles, facial animation systems, and its physics engine. It also takes the idea of being a parasite and makes it more explicit, as modders leverage game art and other content from Valve games, which usually shared assets between games, since they could share their tech. In *Garry's Mod's* release, you could use content from Half-Life, Half-Life 2, Counter-Strike: Source, and Team Fortress 2 as set backdrops, set dressing, characters, and more.

Garry's Mod is a watershed moment to online modding because alongside the existing base content, it was able to leverage another one of Valve's ideas, this time related to its game storefront, Steam, as it released a platform called the Steam Workshop to allow supported

games to take player created content and smoothly integrate it into games using the platform. Once Garry's Mod implemented the Workshop system, its popularity soared as people rushed to create and upload content for others (Figure 3). It's important to note that Steam follows the DMCA's approach to copyright enforcement (USA, 1998), so if a player infringed copyright or game end user licences by ripping content from other games and making it compatible with Garry's Mod, it would only be removed once the content's owners put in a complaint (Steam, 2023). This made the Steam Workshop and Garry's Mod combined into a breeding ground for new and creative mods, and turned the mod into a place where a lot of existing games models would be ported to, so they could be used in various ways, as player models, to add new weapons.

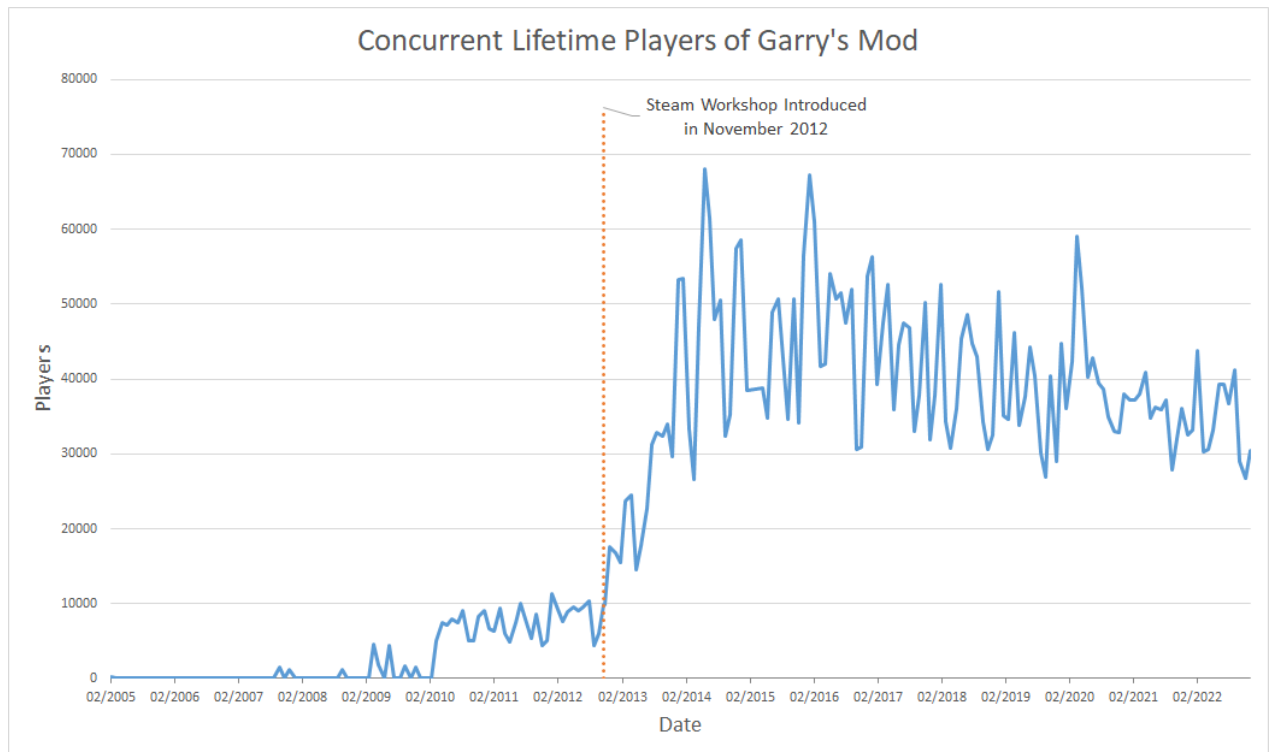


Figure 3: A graph showing the concurrent lifetime players of *Garry's Mod* on steam, with the date when Steam Workshop support was added marked (2023).

This is where modding butts up against law, as the contents of a game is protected by copyright law (Parkin, 2011) . In the vast majority of cases, all game assets are owned by either the game developer or its publisher as soon as they are made. Quickly after its launch, the Steam Workshop became a hub for any or all content to extend Garry's Mod, including those that were made for other games (Figure 4). The scope of Garry's Mod quickly went from a toolset of Valve games, to one where if you look, you can find assets for a plethora of other games, where you can find someone else's submission of another games content, import it, and play. If there is no content related to your game, there's fan made tools and guides to taking the games assets from its game, and making it compatible to Garry's Mod, as long as the person is willing to learn some new skills. Unless the game developers intervene, this is allowed to happen. The fact this is allowed is mostly due to a combination of both the overwhelming amount of complaints that would be needed to enforce this, and the fact it's practically impossible to profit from this endeavour as a modder. This isn't to say that Garry's Mod is exclusively a place for stolen/copyright infringing content; there are thousands of Workshop creations that are original works of thousands of individuals and groups that choose to create and release their work there, including entire games, entirely for free.

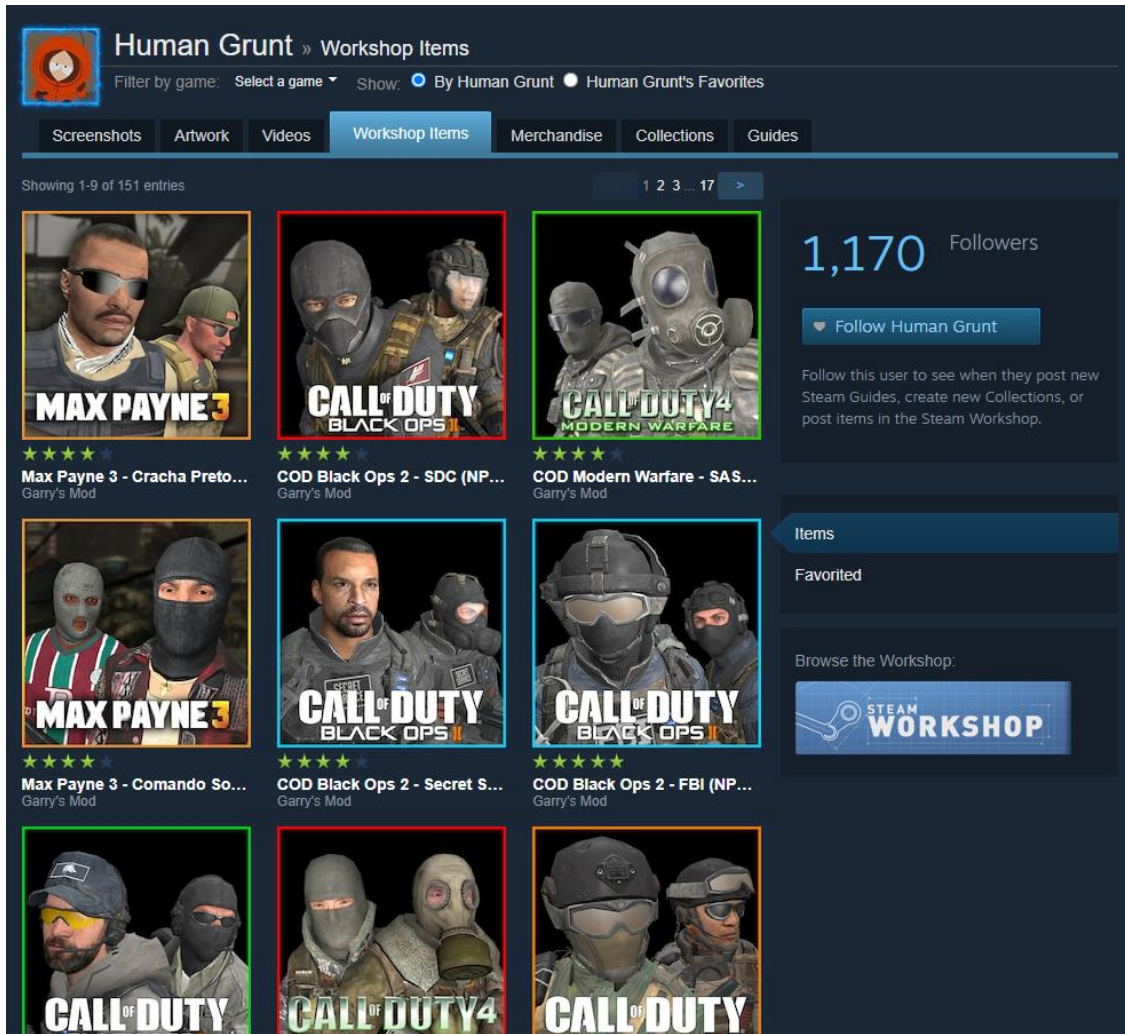


Figure 4: A Steam Workshop creator's uploads, exclusively showing content they ripped from other games (Human Grunt, 2023).

This freedom to as a fan of games, have content from other games to hand, makes Garry's Mod a game with a high value proposition; it's a popular multiplayer game, with the ability to extend itself with the content of other games and make it something unique. However, the Steam Workshop also is a platform for new game modes to be added to Garry's Mod, so that new ways to actually play the game are player authored. Some of the most popular game modes for Garry's Mod being ones that shed the open-ended sandbox gameplay in favour of other gameplay styles, the most popular being online role-play. Other game modes include versions of the party games *Murder in the Dark* and *Mafia*, as well as other modes to just share space online, like the Cinema game mode. A lot of existing content on the workshop is used to support the various types of role play within these game modes, and for some, like StarWarsRP (Figure 5), which almost infringes copyright, with content from other Star Wars games appearing as props to detail and flesh out the experience. The combination of game mode and content freedom allows for combinations of IP and player expression that's almost impossible to get elsewhere within the games industry. Garry's Mod and it's selection of game modes is a natural expression of the agency of modders and how their collective wish may differ from what the games industry is offering. The Garry's Mod community has a taste for games and experiences rooted in a melting pot of ideas, IP and gameplay that is unique to its particular position as a central meeting place for modders to meet and make, to the delight of everyone else who just plays. Role play in particular, is a game genre where the games released by large publishers use pre-specified systems to interact with a static script. In comparison, the multiplayer role play on Garry's Mod is community developed, run and played, and let's players further delve into the "expressive freedom" (Fine, 2002) of table top fantasy games.

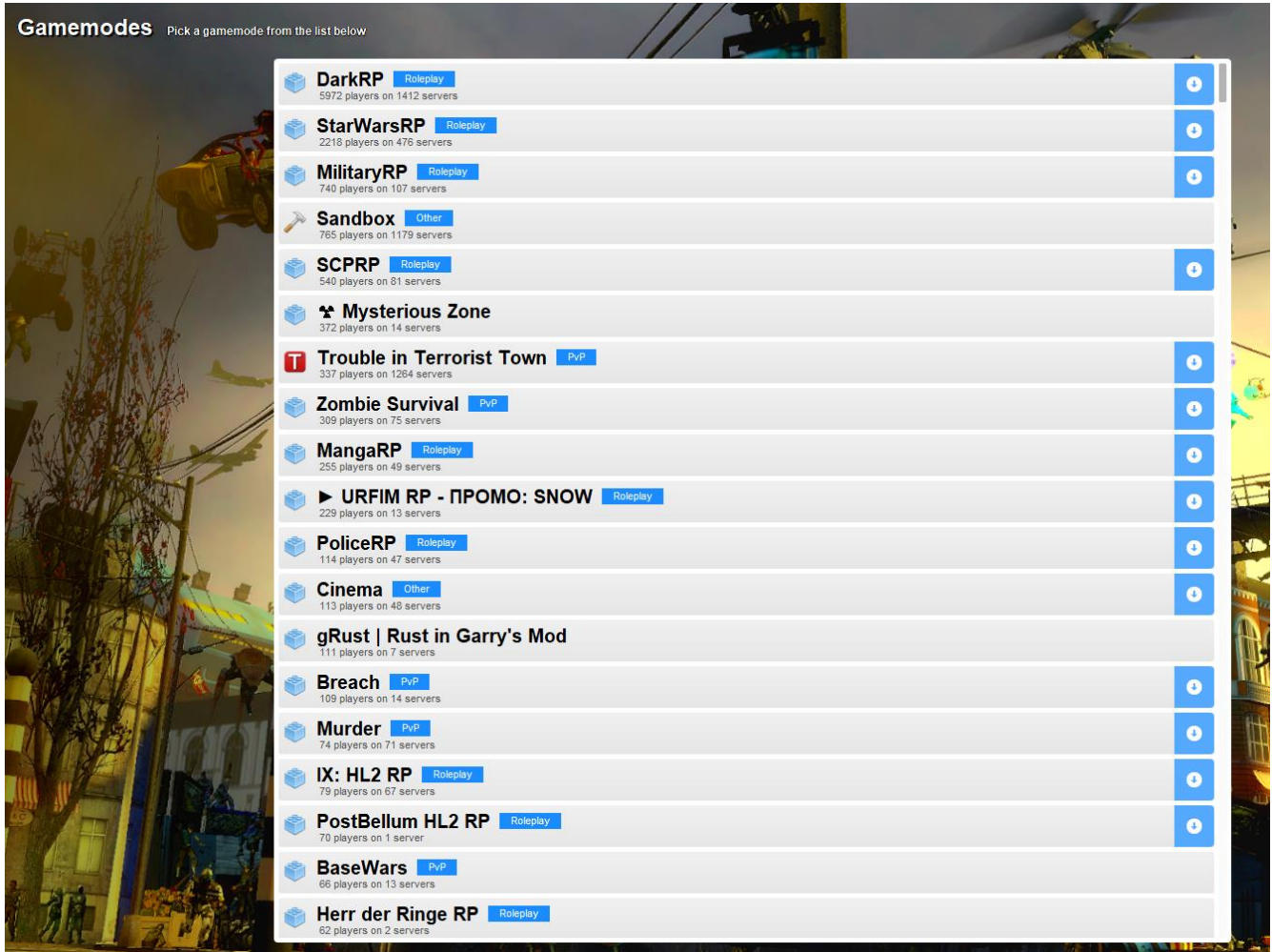


Figure 5: The most popular game modes available in the *Garry's Mod* (2006) server browser, as of the 24th January 2023.

To re-examine this with Serres' framework, Schleiner's assertion that modders are within the halls of larger systems, "[chewing] on the walls of a technically sophisticated game engine" (2017, p. 48) like the rats from Serres' metaphors of parasites, is definitely apt. Modders take the elements from other games, often games released and discarded, takes the good from them, and turn them into new games, new experiences, ones that need no entry fee. Garry's Mod is not unique, there are dozens of other games that have their own modding communities with similar communities, workshop mods, and in the case of Minecraft, a community that totally dwarfs Garry's Mod. Modding isn't a small deal, it's a major part of playing games on the PC. But only on the PC.

On consoles, the games industry has mostly ignored modding scenes (outside of when mods design influences later games), since modding is only fully available to those who can tinker and edit files. Game consoles are a walled garden, where you have to take a game as-is. But even outside of that, games companies aren't as comfortable with modding now. Games companies have recently been more willing to defend potential lost revenue from the likes of mods than before. And if modding can undermine existing games and intellectual property, why would games companies support or promote them?

Chapter 3

The response to modding isn't necessarily a positive one, despite how much value modding can be to developers, or the value it adds to a game past its initial price point, at no cost to the developer. This discussion has made a lot of mention of Valve Software, but they've always had an open approach to both their IP and towards modders as discussed. However, there are more developers who will not entertain mods for their game, not aiding modders in their efforts, and some who go out of their way to minimise modding for their games, especially when it starts to step on the toes of the game developer's potential plans and profits.

There have been a variety of pushbacks against modding, or even exploring the files of a game generally. This has coincided with several changes in the games industry, in relation how games are designed, profited off of, and the larger structure in how games are bought and sold. There's been a general decrease in the number of large single player games, and alongside the growth of multiplayer games in their place (Thier, 2017), there's been less toleration of modding for these online games, as they can open the game up to cheating. This has always been an issue in relation to modding game files for online games, but with the rise of competitive systems being built directly into games, there's a lot more frustration for players when someone breaks the play parameters set by developers to guarantee their own success. The push to online multiplayer games has also led to an increase of monetisation strategies, borrowed from the mobile game market, including 'microtransactions', regardless if the game is free-to-play or not (King and Delfabbro, 2019). These monetisation systems can be in place to sell more gameplay variety to players, but more often than not it affects cosmetic aspects while playing online. For the developers, this means that outside of the free to play, if there is one, they can continue to get people to pay for the game via repeated small payments (King and Delfabbro,

2019). Where you could previously download a gold version of a weapon for a game from a mod website, and have it visible to yourself when you use that weapon, now the gold skin may be a rare item in a 'loot box', "an in-game reward system that can be purchased repeatedly with real money to obtain a random selection of virtual items" (King and Delfabbro, 2019). The upside against mods is now that your items are in the definitions of the games design proper, and it means your teammate will be able to see your expression via weapons, but at a cost. Modding opens up the ability to change the games files to make specific character or weapon skins be visible to you without paying, undercutting the microtransactions, so there's a monetary basis to ensuring there's no mods in game. This is what Michel De Certeau means when he describes how that:

"The loss that was voluntary in the gift economy is transformed into a transgression in a profit economy: it appears as an excess (a waste), a challenge (a rejection of profit), or a crime (an attack on property)". (1984, cited in Schleiner 2017)

One specific example in relation to this would be the *Grand Theft Auto* games. The *Grand Theft Auto* series has had a long history with modding on the PC, but also a history of bootlegs of the older games still being made and sold in the global south (Gerencser, 2017). However, since the release of the *Grand Theft Auto V* in 2013, especially with its new online component, their stance moved into one more aggressive. Take-Two Interactive, the games publisher, attempted to force the game's most popular mod manager, OpenIV, to be shut down, in a move to prevent game mods from undermining their online mode for the game (Livingston, 2017). According to Take-Two, this was because mods could be used to load exploits and create money, undermining the microtransaction based economy of the online mode. However, after protest from fans and OpenIV's developer, and further communication with Take-Two, it was allowed to be distributed again (Matulef, 2017). This is the level of control that the publishers retain over

their work at all times, the sort of control that was consciously and carefully ceded by games companies like Id Software (who at this point have ceased their previous practice of releasing mod tools and source code to their games) and Valve. Going by Rockstar Games' end-user licence agreements you agree to when playing a game, you agree that you, as a player, are not allowed to "reverse engineer, decompile, disassemble, display, perform, prepare derivative works based on, or otherwise modify the Software, in whole or in part" (Rockstar Games, 2019). This effectively works as a catch all for modding. As a company, once you come across a mod that you don't want out in the world, due to potential lost revenue, it re-appropriating another game's content or IP which makes you potentially liable in court, or just don't like it, you can throw the agreement you have to agree with if you play the game to shut it down.

The freedom afforded to modders is one that allows games to be exploited in new and unique ways, but when the business of making games has become the business of selling more varied expression back to players, often through predatory means (King and Delfabbro, 2018), they're a nuisance. The act of reusing the developers tools to change, expand and add value to your game is now an attack on the bottom line. And this is a bottom line that has help raise the money made by the games industry to levels above even the film industry (Gilbert, 2020). Modders are no longer the (Informational) Parasite, making their own counter-cultural signal from the noise of the wider gaming industry: they are now a (name) Parasite, one that burdens the industry with their continued meddling in the files and systems of these larger and more expensive games. These games now require more and more of a return via their microtransactions for games to continue being a profitable affair, to see that profit grow year on year. Modding never made any economic sense; their valued position came from a place of respect for the most dedicated of fans of a game, so dedicated they learn how to work on it

further. Now? Their place in the industry isn't as relevant. While modding is continuing to make older games outlive their cultural half-life (pun not intended), can modding be guaranteed to continue when the trend of the video games industry is further alienating people away from modding, when the games they want to mod are impenetrable, and the thought of modding synonymous with the negative feelings of cheating in online multiplayer?

Conclusion

It's clear that the dialogue between modders and the games industry is one that's moderated by the actions of the larger players in the industry. Modding once had a respected place alongside game developers, as something that would add value to a game, that would extend a game's lifetime, and help fledgling developers cut their teeth and grow their skills before they could enter the industry as professionals. As time has gone on, the gulf between modding and developers has widened. This could probably be attributed to a change in how development is done, with increasing budgets, and an increasing reliance on newer, modern engines not developed in house by developers, which are harder to modify by design. And as discussed, an important aspect is that modern multiplayer games make modding harder due to the aim of modding not being adding new content that can't be controlled and monetised

I'm of the opinion that this is a step back in the potential growth games have, and failure on the behalf of game developers to cultivate organic art and expression from their games. Games can and have opened up a new industry, one that makes over 60 billion dollars a year (Entertainment Software Association, 2022), so for an accessible avenue of creation to be shut down for the sake of money and convenience on the developers side would be a shame.

However, this discussion has mostly focused on a few large developers in particular. It would be remiss to not mention the independent developer scene, and how in the wake of modding's decline, a lot of developers are just making their own games instead. The likes of Steam and other platforms like itch.io has opened itself up to be an important pillar of getting independent games in front of people, and over the last few years, all of the game console manufacturers have broadened their programmes for taking on independent games and giving them the ability

to gain a new audience as well. That being said, making an entire game is an order of magnitude more work than editing an existing one, and this can raise the technical cost of entering and creating. If you're an artist, you also need to be a game designer, programmer, and more to get a game completed and out the door; with modding, you can directly edit what you want to change, and share.

Modding is a specific and unique form of creating new experiences in games. The apparent decline in their relevance, and the specific modes of expression it allows, especially those that are outside the realm of acceptability in relation to art games, or even naive attempts at reusing other games content. As games age, they often become harder and harder to source, due to games going out of print, not being available online, declining hardware, companies responsible going bust and increasing incompatibility with modern hardware. To play *Quake* now, you're more likely that not going to get a better experience from one of the fan made forks of its original open sourced code than you would get running the original version of the game. Modding opens up parts or even the entirety of these games up to newer, often younger, audiences. The games industry's response to this is often focused on monetary value of these games: the most popular ones can warrant a rerelease, or often a remake, where the developers fear there won't be enough of an audience interested in a game without it being technically advanced enough to compare to modern games. The stranger games, the stranger aspects of games, have their edges sanded off, control schemes updated, textures remade - what made them interesting in their own right isn't fashionable anymore, so when a remake happens, things change. A remake of a game is effectively a new game. This is another aspect of games as an emerging medium that is unlike a lot of other mediums. And this the process that happens to the games with an audience; when games are interesting, but not interesting enough to warrant a whole new

release, they're left to become increasingly hard to find.

Modding support keeps these games alive: the games I've mentioned are not modern releases, but they're relevant because of the efforts of many smaller voices continuing to re-evaluate and change the experience enough. Id Software's approach to open sourcing their older games has since ceased, but the lasting legacy of their game's mod scenes is because of their willingness to cede control the IP they could hold on to until every computer that could run *DOOM* or *Quake* is no longer working.

Modding should not be a footnote in the games industry's history. As it currently stands, modding was a momentary interest the games industry had in understanding the interactivity of the medium they were making, and allowing it to be a dialogue between games and their biggest, most dedicated fans. It was and is more than something that gave a lot of people an intro into the industry before there were formalised third level education streams into the industry, a way to learn by making, and do something new. Formalised modding for games all but drying up means that modding either exists on the periphery of the industry, never allowing itself to build into something larger, however maybe that is also a symptom of a changing internet as well; forum culture like the QWF and QuakeWorld which supported modding died in the wake of social media websites ushering in Web 2.0. While Steam and their platform supports modding, it's not hard to view their approach as making sure that regardless of what appears out of the independent scenes, that it stays on and remains tied to Steam's storefront, ensuring that players stay in their ecosystem.

This isn't a eulogy for modding, but to lay bare exactly what it was, why it mattered, and why it hasn't lasted past its brief heyday outside of a few exceptions. Modding remains as an important mode of expression for games, just one that has become increasingly opposed to the games they mod against, and one that's increasingly more niche. I'll just be worried that it may lose all relevance entirely, and become a short, historic moment for a young medium.

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