
Creativity through Communities: The Case of Game Modders

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ABSTRACT

Creativity is for both individuals as well as industry a highly sought after trait. To fully capitalize of this inherently human trait, environments that initiative and foster creative thinking need to be created. However, with not even a commonly accepted definition for this broad concept existing, little is yet known about the processes and factors that promote creativity. In this paper, we hence argue to draw inspiration from contexts where groups of people are already being highly creative. Concretely, we describe the case of communities of those who modify games to identify aspects that might help empowering users to be more productive, and more innovative.

CCS CONCEPTS

• **Human-centered computing** → **HCI design and evaluation methods; Empirical studies in HCI; Ethnographic studies.**

KEYWORDS

creativity, games, game mods, modders, communities, creative self-expression, creativity support

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INTRODUCTION

With social and economic structure becoming more dynamic, creativity and creative thinking are increasingly recognized as a valuable trait [6]. Building on the argument that every human is inherently creative when in a supportive environment [13] and given the right tools [2], our proposition for the design of future applications that support creative work with crowds is to draw inspiration from those contexts where groups of people are already highly creative while also having fun. This paper provides a brief overview of game modding communities, highlighting how game modding is a highly creative practice. Based on insights from these communities, we argue that building a community that people will want to belong to as well as feel like working towards a common goal will create an environment that fosters creative thinking.

Video games off the shelf are no longer enough for engaged and enthusiastic gamers. Wanting more for their favorite past-time activity and recognizing slumbering potential, at first only very few, tech-savvy and skilled gamers took it upon themselves to improve video games. After some tensions as well as threatened law-suits, the game industry slowly began to realize the value these adaptations, add-ons and conversions held for them, meaning greater brand reach, free marketing, higher sales as well as easy recruiting possibilities. As a result, some companies - among them some of the largest in the industry - started to release tools and engines (i.e. software development kits, SDKs) that facilitate the modification of video games (= game "mods") not only for highly skilled programmers but also beginners interested in attaching some personal meaning to games and essentially making them "their own" [10].

Game modding as creative expression

Creating game mods has been described as creative self-expression [3] with game modding communities considered as creative communities of practice [7]. Some even went so far as indicating that mod making is the "highest condition of creativity one can reach among computer games" [1]. This creative expression is exemplified by the mod that turned *Unreal Tournament* from a bloodbath into a dancing arena¹ or creating models allowing to build authentic medieval estates in *The Sims 3*² (see Figure 1 & 2). One might argue that the level of creativity involved in creating game mods differs widely. For instance, when comparing "adopting" a character or object from one game to the other with the development of a total conversion such as *Counter Strike*³, at first glance it appears that the former is not very creative. Yet, attention ought to be paid to creative styles [4]. To that end, it is

¹ The ESCOnline/ Jade Phoenix Project - <https://www.moddb.com/mods/esconline>

² Riverburg Keep - <https://www.thesimsresource.com/themes/Medieval/downloads/details/category/sims3-lots-residential/title/riverburg-keep/id/1328976/>

³ *Counter Strike* is a total conversion of the game *Half-Life*.



Figure 1: Screenshot of the Dance Mod feature for Unreal Tournament, posted by the user Leonardo-DiVinci in 2005.



Figure 2: Castle named "Riverburg Keep" created by the user fredbrenny for The Sims 3 using own and creations from the TSR community.

both important to consider how people *display* their creativity and - in particular pertinent to the game modding context - what are the objects/outcomes of their creativity. Returning to the example, "copying" the object from one game to the other might not be creative in the sense of creating a novel, innovative artifact. However, potentially the way the object was ported to a different game environment (e.g. physics engine) and the steps involved was rather unique and hence creative.

Motives behind game modding

The effort involved in creating a mod - depending on its type and complexity - can be tremendous, with some teams spending fifteen to twenty hours weekly over several years [5]. In light of this enormous workload, the question arises as to why people spent so much time on modifying games? Researchers investigating the motivations of game modders identified three main motives: intrinsic reasons, increasing job opportunities and altruism. Clustered as intrinsic reasons, mods are created in order to (i) improve play experience and enjoyment (e.g. identify with the game content by for instance including nostalgic content), (ii) hone skills and learn new techniques (e.g. modeling and texturing), (iii) enjoyment of the activity (e.g. fun while coding). In addition to having several motives simultaneously, the degree to which these apply varies among game modders. On the motive of hoping to acquire a job in the games industry, Sotamaa found that the more experienced a modder is the less relevant this motive becomes [12]. Lastly, altruism links to the fact that game modding is essentially a collaborative activity [8].

Game modding has a strong community focus in terms of collaboration (i.e. creating mods together), exchanging ideas and learning from each other (i.e. through forums and posting comments) and receiving recognition and feedback from those you use mods [9]. When asked about their motivation, some modders indicated that the most enjoyable part is the co-operation in creating and implementing ideas as well as the shared enthusiasm and to some degree devotion of all involved. While game modding has become an integral part of game culture [11], so is the community around it a central part within it. Providing support, recognition and a feeling of relatedness, the practice of game modding creates a sense of community [11].

IMPLICATIONS FOR CREATIVE CROWD-WORK AND CONCLUSION

The feeling of being a (valued) member of a community is a key factor in modders motivation to engage in sometimes enormous workloads with the objective to not only improve one's own experience but also those of other players. In essence, the motives and drive to engage in this creative practice are routed in sharing a common objective and sharing something they feel devoted to. Hence in order to replicate such a highly and intrinsically motivated creative environment for crowdsourced creativity support systems, a common denominator ought to found/created. Such a commonality could be initiating a sense of belonging or community. One idea to do so could be by highlighting the

goal members of the crowd-innovation are working towards. In case such a goal is not easy to grasp or communicate, designing the environment as common denominator might be another approach, for instance, by making it a game in itself.

In this paper, we argued that drawing inspirations from game modding communities that voluntarily and whilst having fun produce highly creative products and services is worthwhile when trying to develop software and user interfaces that empower users to be more productive, and more innovative. Surely, to fully understand the dynamics and relations within game modding communities further research is needed.

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