Mods and Convergence Culture:

Connecting character creation, user interface, and participatory design

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ABSTRACT

To understand the context, motivations, and implications of video game modifications, this paper examines three popular mods which affect UI and character creation options in the game Skyrim. Based within a foundation of participatory and fan culture studies, the network of interdependent mods is examined so that future research may advocate for participatory design used in the game development process.

CCS CONCEPTS

Human-centered computing → Collaborative and social computing → Collaborative and social computing theory, concepts and paradigms → Collaborative content creation

KEYWORDS

User Interface, Participatory Culture, Experience Architecture, Participatory Design

1 INTRODUCTION

Seven years after the release of Elder Scrolls V: Skyrim the game is still widely popular, with play diminishing more slowly than most games of that era [18]. One reason for this continued popularity is the ability of a PC user to 'mod' it. Mods are, "Ways of extending and altering officially released computer games, their graphics, sounds and characters, with

custom-produced content" [15]. Recently, mods have found their way into fan-created content such as: Let's Plays (performative video game playing), Machinima (video game cinema), and fan art [12]. The field of fan studies has traditionally pertained to those who watch, discuss, and modify the content of traditional, non-interactive, media [5]. Authors like Henry Jenkins have established theoretical frameworks to view the complicated and often very personal relationship between fans, the media that they consume, and the content they produce [5, 6]. These frameworks have been discussed, challenged, and broadened to include non-traditional forms of media [2]. This paper is based on a foundation of both experience architecture and fan or participatory culture studies in order to better understand the context, motivation, and implications of modding. One area where mods are relevant to both fields is the network that connects centralized mods that introduce new or altered functionality to secondary mods, which could not exist without the initial modification. An examination of the central mods' alterations and additions to both the user interface (UI) and the potential for media convergence within the game allows us to understand mods as participatory practices which affect the experience architecture of Skyrim. After investigating three mods which are responsible for 500 or more dependent mods, this paper advocates for future research regarding the connection between mods and participatory design.

2 METHODS

On Nexusmods.com, where players upload and download mods, there are over 50,000 mods available for Skyrim [10]. The scope of mods examined here is limited to the top 50 mods for Skyrim ranked by total downloads. The data collected about these mods includes: number of downloads, mod title, date created, number of user "endorsements," and the number of secondary mods which require it. Out of 50, eight mods have 200 or more dependent mods, five have 300 dependent mods, and three mods have over 500 [10]. Upon discovering this disparity, I narrowed my examination to those three mods which are required by 500 or more:

- SkyUI: "Elegant, PC-friendly interface mod with many advanced features" [16].
- ApachiiSkyHair:"New Female and Male Hairstyles for Humans, Elves and Orcs. Converted hair from Sims2 and Sims3" [1].
- RaceMenu: "Complete overhaul to the character creation menu including new customization features such as multiple RGBA warpaints, body paints, hand paint, and foot paints" [14].

Title	Created	Total Downloads	Number of dependent mods
SkyUI	16 December 2011	18,545,600	646
ApachiiSkyHair	17 February 2012	12647230	518
RaceMenu	07 January 2013	7948173	553

3 DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSIONS

To understand the connection between these three mods we must consider not just the benefits of an improved UI but also the extent of our convergent culture, which practices mixing media and rewards media literacy [4]. One method of including other media content within Skyrim is the creation of custom character presets that allow users to export and share their avatars with each other. The ability to create almost infinitely unique characters in Skyrim has led to the emergence of mods across media within fan content such as Let's Plays, Machinima, fan art, and more [12, 15]. To achieve this, modders had to extend the character creation interface (CCI) options by creating alternate CCI UIs. For example, ApachiiSkyHair is not a UI mod, but requires a separate CCI UI mod titled "ShowRaceMenu Precache Killer," which is similar to RaceMenu in functionality and also ranks among the top 50 Skyrim mods [10]. The result of this effort is a game system in which fans can replace dragons with Thomas the Tank Engine or create an avatar identical to Avril Lavigne. Rewarding existing media knowledge and co-creation efforts by fans in this way is one possible method to ensure the exponential growth of modding, a practice that proves to be valuable both culturally and economically [11, 15]. User Interface, Media Convergence, and Participatory Culture can be used to advocate that game developers utilize Participatory Design when the feedback loop of modding and the fan content related to modding is examined.

4 FUTURE WORK

Although some serious games researchers and developers have already documented their efforts, more focus on Participatory Design use in video game development is necessary in order to understand the scope of its use. Additionally, in order to build off of the budding relationship between HCI and game development, mods should be more thoroughly examined across multiple games and time spans [9]. The context, motivation, and implications of mods as participatory practices that affect experience architecture can and should be explored as an opportunity to learn more about both community design practices and our convergent media society.

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