

Gaming and Programming Affinities in Modding Communities

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Abstract: In this paper, I use JP Gee (2004)'s notion of affinity spaces to theorize the typology of divergent game modder identities. Studying varying routes for participation in modding observed within *Civfanatics*—an online *Civilization* based fan modding site, I investigate players' motivations to mod and thus, how they learn to mod. In this paper, I present a typology of varying modding inclinations as observed within an online modding community.

Introduction

Over recent years, a growing body of work in the field of education and the computer sciences has identified game modding as a “cutting edge” avenue for fostering a broad range of critical information technology practices. However, as we further research and design of platforms that can leverage game modding to teach computer programming, it is imperative that a mature theory of learning through modding and learning to program through modding, takes into consideration the varying motivations that sustain it and the trajectories of productive participation that are innate to affinity-based (J Gee, 2005) fan practices, like modding. Studying varying routes for participation in modding observed within *Civfanatics*—an online *Civilization* based fan modding site, I investigate how players characterize mods and mod-production processes, i.e. how do modders with varying levels of technical expertise learn to mod and how do their motivations (or affinities) shape the way they perceive mod-production? Through discourse analysis of player interviews, in corroboration with their mod-production activity online, I present a typology of divergent modder identities.

Theoretical Perspectives

Traditionally, from a sociocultural learning perspective, learning through participation in community of practice (Lave & Wenger, 1991) or through apprenticeship (Rogoff, 1995) has been characterized as learning within a community in which less experienced members are engaged in a culturally organized activity, eventually becoming capable of mature participation or “full membership”. From this perspective, the functional value of knowledge is exemplified by exemplar participation and better understood by characterizing what such participation entails (e.g. “becoming a mid-wife”, Lave & Wenger (1991)). Nonetheless, the source of motivations to engage in fan-based production practices, such as making game mods, machinimas or writing fan-fiction defy traditional viewpoints about exemplar expert identities, in that these practices are essentially amateur productions for fan-based or *networked audiences* (Varnelis, 2008); as such, these practices may be best depicted as being *affinity-based*. Gee (2005) describes affinity spaces as loosely knit participatory spaces where members of the online community coalesce around broad common pursuits, with ample mobility to pursue individual interest. In other words, affinity spaces can be thought of as niche networks of common goals, resources, and peer support. Players in these spaces engage in an intrinsically motivating activity, or fan-pursuit, to author game-based media artifacts as a way to remediate their game play experiences (Squire, 2006).

Research Context and Findings

Analyses presented in this short paper have been conducted on data drawn from a larger dataset collected in a 2-year discourse centered online ethnographic study of the online game modding community in *Civfanatics*. *Civfanatics*, one of the most popular *Civilization* gaming sites, is a central hub for numerous fan-produced artifacts and gaming discourses, and thus, can be thought of as a niche affinity-based modding space for *Civilization* fans (Durga, 2012). Player profiles included in this study were interviewed about their interests in modding and experience playing *Civilization*, a detailed account of which has been elaborated in Durga (2012). Through a critical discourse analysis (Gee, 2005) of three participant interviews excerpts, the three modding inclinations were characterized as: (a) mod-savvy, or displaying an eclectic disposition in selecting mods to play, (b) “improvisational play,” or constantly striving to become a better player or (c) being a hobbyist/amateur programmer who may have little or no intrinsic motivation to play the game, but seeks membership in the community, nonetheless, and leverage the community's collective capacity to encourage programming. The typology of modders (Durga, 2012) revealed that motivation to mod is an amalgamation of interest and abilities that get exemplified through six prototypical mod-production practices, evidenced in these three kinds of modder profiles, illustrated in Figure-I below.

Typological compilation of modder identities

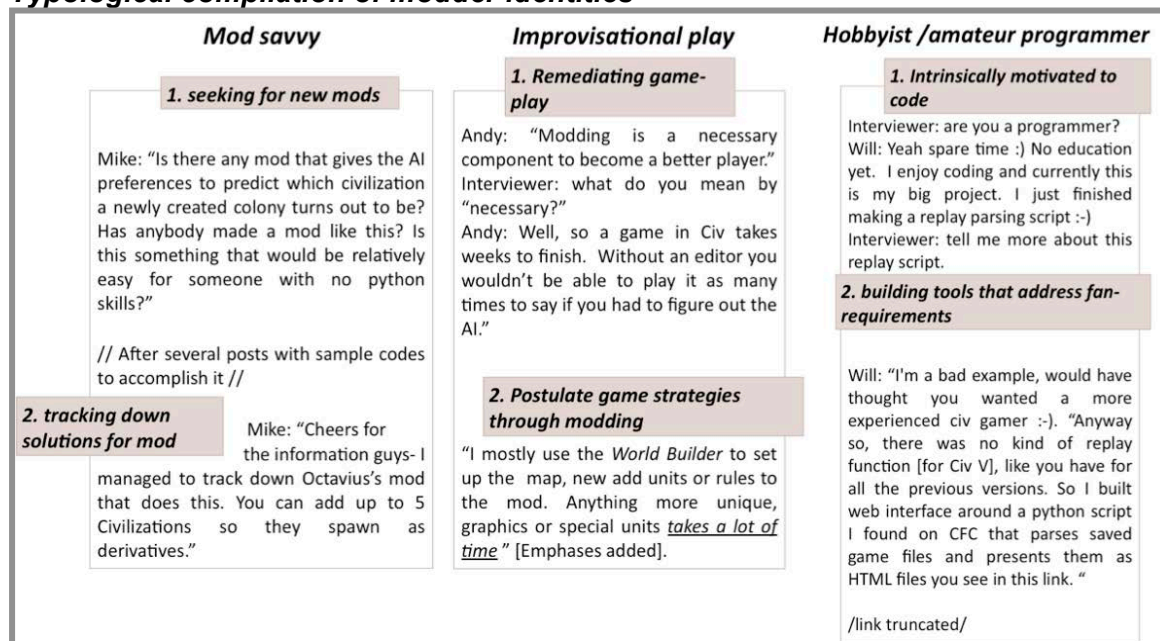


Figure 1: Corroboration of significant excerpts from interviews and forum activity depicting modding inclinations

Conclusions

In our attempts to find “productive” value of game modding we have perhaps remained shortsighted by focusing on the obvious and immediate “effects” of modding as a motivation to program that, at its best, has only resulted in superficial adaptation of “mods” as one of the several other project-based pedagogical approaches (for instance, game programming) to teach students to program (Kafai, 2006). However, as can be seen from this study, player motivation is a primary determinant of learning to mod within affinity-based contexts. In other words, since competence development in modding is contingent upon a player’s will to engage in modding, it is crucial that we draw attention to and elicit motivational contrasts that exist within an increasingly interdisciplinary practice, like game modding. Again, these inclinations must in no means be understood as being mutually exclusive; rather they provide ways in which players’ choices about “coding” approaches make sense in the context of modding, i.e. mod savvy players in their modding approaches, seek to understand the abstract models of the game and thus translate it into code. While, players already coming into modding spheres with a propensity to work with codes, such as Will (see figure above), seek for ways in which they can exercise and implement certain coding strategies to build something in-game or for game, drawing upon an abstract understanding of the game to begin with.

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