

Monetization & *Skyrim*, Appropriation & Play

by

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ABSTRACT

Mods, or user modifications created by fans in games such as *Skyrim*, are particularly salient illustrations of the hybridity of authorship being discussed in contemporary media studies (Merrin; Jenkins, *Fans*; Bruns, *Blogs*). In 2015, Bethesda Softworks and Valve Corporation collaborated on a new monetization model for *Skyrim* mods. However, it was subsequently shut down four days later due to backlash it prompted from the target community of content creators for *Skyrim* (McWhertor).

This thesis explores expressions of modders around the controversial monetization of *Skyrim* mods on the *Steam Workshop*. Using content and discourse analysis I critically examine the “Ask Me Anything” (AMA) thread created by the CEO of Valve Gabe Newell on *Reddit.com*, April 25, 2015. Using three theories around the lens of modding as play I examined the discourse in this text and found expression of the importance of the assemblage of play (Taylor) in an assemblage of modding, elements of differentiation between professional and leisure production values as playbour (Kücklich), and ways of understanding how to support value generation and monetize participatory production in better ways through produsage (Bruns, “Produsage”).

DEDICATION

Dovahkiin, Dovahkiin

Naal ok zin los vahriin

Wah dein vokul mahfaeraak ahst vaal

Ahrk fin norok paal graan

Fod nust hon zindro zaan

Dovahkiin, fah hin kogaan mu draal

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Introduction

Game modding can be defined as the activity of creating, adding, or modifying existing commercial digital games by players using development tools (Sihvonen). These modified elements are called game mods, and are a major factor in the value proposition of some of the top grossing computer games of all time, including *Doom*, *Quake*, *The Sims*, *Skyrim*, and *World of Warcraft*, to name just a few. Mods add significant value to games such as these because they provide a constant stream of fresh and interesting game content created and integrated into the games by their players. These player-creators, or “modders”, are part of a subculture within gamer culture, but also are distinguished in key ways from wider gamer culture. Gamer culture is more often seen as openly adversarial, and often critical toward industry efforts (Jensen and De Castell). Modders are openly collaborative in their work and communication and seen as influencers and champions by the industry. These aspects and differences create conflict whenever these three participants intersect with a game. When the industry or gamer culture shifts in how they engage with mods and modders, some presumptions around the discourse in the mod culture can be unexpected. Modders are often more aligned with industry than gamers might expect or more aligned with gamer culture than industry leaders might hope. Modders are unique agents in many ways, and for interesting reasons which will be explored here.

A mod monetization model for the enormously popular *Skyrim* game was launched on April 23rd 2015, then shut down four days later due to the backlash it received from the target community of content creators (McWhertor). The objective of my

interdisciplinary MA research is to examine the cultural reasons why Valve and Bethesda Softworks's first attempt to directly monetize user-created content for commercial video games failed to achieve success within its community. I will examine the relationship between professional game development and participatory gamer culture with respect to the co-creation of game mods as a form of gameplay and as a significant source of potential revenue for game publishers and developers. I will contextualize how game mods can inform understandings of motivation, agency and social power flows across industry and player identity and culture. Specifically, I will explore why the monetization of *Skyrim* mods on the Steam Workshop was so deeply divisive for the *Skyrim* mod community and what this tells us about modding and gamer culture.

A History of Modding

At the very beginning of computer gaming, there was no game industry, but there was modding. The first games were made, shared, and modified. Even as Nolan Bushnell (founder of Atari and first person to commercialise digital games with *Computer Space*) began to monetize what would become arcades and consoles (Egenfeldt-Nielsen et al), PC games remained shared or pirated, and modded. Even in those early days when games were distributed on floppy discs and shared between friends and acquaintances, they rarely existed as 'clean' or original games with unaltered code. There were always changes to games, and even in those early years, I can clearly remember typing the code into a TRS-80 computer and giggling as we set our player values into the thousands to cheat the games. PC game mods have no discernable 'first' because, games have been modded since the earliest titles, such as *Spacewar!* on the *PDP-1* computer (Egenfeldt-Nielsen et al). Some would argue that *Wolfenstein* or *Doom* mods were the first mods on

the scene, if you take PC game modding as solely the alterations of popular high budget (AAA) PC games. Whether or not they were first, certainly the modding of those popular games did help to foster the spread of modding.

In the early 1990s the relationship between the digital games industry and gamers changed significantly because of a shift in agency facilitated by the first instances of popular mods and mod tools for multi million selling AAA PC games, such as *Doom* and *Castle Wolfenstein*. The open architecture employed in these games, with some game files not compiled but left in an editable format, made it possible for users to first manually edit the files with rudimentary tools and then later to develop more sophisticated creative modding techniques. As value was derived through participatory production and the increased loyalty, shelf life, and therefore profit of *Doom*, the tools became better supported and eventually developed and distributed with *Quake* and *Quake II* by a company called Id (Kücklich). Other companies such as Epic and Bethesda followed suit in the AAA PC games space. Soon many PC games either supported mods, or at least made affordances for modding which would be exploited to varying degrees.

This evolution of game technology and formation of game industry runs parallel to hacker culture and gamer culture, including the introduction of console hacking game techniques such as Game Genie. Game Genie was a cartridge which allowed the remapping of registries between the cartridge and the console via discovered codes, allowing the user to alter variables in the game or in other words, to cheat. At the dawn of the internet mods were already being distributed via bulletin board systems (BBS) and soon found wider distribution and sharing options in Internet relay chat (IRC) channels, file transfer protocol (FTP) sites, and even some early modding websites. For many there

was no distinction yet in the subcultures of hacking, mods, piracy, and other cybercrime, which were seen as intertwined. This led to some confusion in the game industry, which built up to an apex around 1999 when piracy and used game sales were a significant detractor from revenue, while the appropriation of games by gamers engaged in modding was counterintuitively amplifying revenue (Deeming & Murphy). I personally remember well the death of *Sega Dreamcast* due to piracy driven politics (Tsotsorin), and attending game design classes where we were taught how to block mods, including but not limited to trainers and configuration file hacks, alongside ways to prevent emergent gameplay. In the days before indie game studios began making billions amid the ‘casual revolution,’ (Juul) control, maintenance of the industrial age paradigm of producer delivering, and consumers consuming were already on the decline.

I speak plainly in this recounting, as this is my own history too. I participated to some degree in all of the above as mod culture developed. I traded mods for DOS games like *Missile Command* on floppy disc when I was eight. I dialed in with my ‘386 SX33’ into the local dry cleaner’s BBS (Bulletin Boar System) to check out the latest MUD (multi-user dungeon) mods. I made maps for *Doom* and *Duke Nukem*, and played those maps with friends on dial-up peer to peer connections before the internet was available. We would go to the local university and access the internet before it was widely available and download maps and mods to floppy disks and bring those home too.

My account also differs from post-polished histories publicly available in some respects. I find many sources twist this history of early mods into some valorous supportive industry endeavor. The reality as I experienced it was a vilification of modding at its inception. This was why companies like *Id* did not leave their files open in support of

modding, but in order to make their own development processes more streamlined. I clearly recall suppression from industry and the rhetoric of mods as a violation of copyright, exploitation, cheating, and a form of cybercrime not unlike other forms of hacking. When *Id* and others realized mods were good for sales, they turned a blind eye and made things more open. But historically companies never had a direct interaction with modding; they just let it happen quietly, until *Epic* games and *Unreal* made some official map lists, hosted the 'Make something Unreal' competitions (in which I was a finalist for my total conversion mod *Neosaka* in 2004), and launched official mod support.

By this time in the 2010s PC game modding was a widespread activity and the culture of modders well established, with some modders emerging as leaders. Modders at this stage were very engaged in the 'gamer' subculture on PC. This group was mostly young males, as there were even more barriers at that time for other groups to engage in terms of language, gender, ability, and financial status, which led to a group with little diversity. Kücklich makes an astute criticism of this homogeneous situation when he writes, "The games industry's use of modding culture as a recruiting pool also results in a feedback loop that effectively prevents the industry from embracing new market segments outside the core audience of young males" (4). This is still true (Jenson and De Castell), and this acknowledgment that modders are predominantly male is certainly a limitation of any research involving mods and modders, including mine. It is a limitation because although we only have their usernames to identify posters with, this narrow demographic profile of modders would suggest that diverse voices were lacking in the AMA, and will be lacking in the resulting data as a result of this cultural history.

Modding at present is still not embraced uniformly by the games industry, as there are monetization downsides which a developer and publisher must carefully consider in adding in-game affordances or any support for modding. Games like *The Witcher 3* have many mods and an affordance for modding, but no mod tools from the developer. *Super Mario Maker* from Nintendo is a console game which is only a level editor and distribution platform to make and distribute various *Mario* levels in a thinly gamified manner. *Skyrim*, released in 2011 and still actively modded in 2019, is somewhere in the middle. The game comes with a very robust suite of modding tools far beyond basic level editing. However, Bethesda Softworks, the makers of *Skyrim*, take no part in promoting mods, make no interface for users to discover mods, and routinely release game updates which cause cascade failure to mods that are interdependent on one another. This industry giant moves and the modders scurry around it to reposition and keep the mods viable. Meanwhile Bethesda takes no legal action against possible copyright and intellectual property concerns with modding in favor of the significant increases in shelf life, engagement, and ultimately profit that the participatory production of mods provides them: production happening from a mostly young male PC core gamer culture perspective, production which the industry ignores in terms of being stakeholders, intellectual property, legal grey areas they transgress, and as we will see repeatedly in the case of paid mods, value generation.

Valve and Steam

Steam is the digital game distribution platform which launched the *Skyrim* monetization model, and is an important starting point in retracing the events that led to the controversial *Reddit* AMA. *Steam* was first announced at the Game Developers

Conference 2002. It was introduced as a platform to enable Valve's various online games to be constantly updated, filling a huge need at the time. I wrote a blog article in 2003 titled 'The Death of PC Gaming,' published on my own, long since discontinued blog. Valve was already hard at work addressing almost every issue I had raised in that article. A year later in 2004 Valve began selling games on *Steam* and required users of all of Valve's first party games including *Half-Life 2* to have a *Steam* account on PC. This meant *Steam* could continuously update their products, fix bugs, deliver content (not user created mods yet), and other official modifications to any base game of theirs, whether purchased on the platform or at retail. This also formed a sort of digital rights management and paradigm shift against the rampant piracy, cheating, and hacking of those days, with gamers finding it harder and harder to justify persistence in the face of such convenience.

In 2005, Valve began distributing third party titles, becoming a major PC game distribution platform. After third party content profits were in the mix, Valve focused on *Steam*, increasing the company's market share to the point of near monopoly in the PC games space. In 2010 *Steam* was redesigned to become a hub for launching games and game libraries, with new supporting social features. Valve also launched the *Steam Workshop*, a place within *Steam* for user generated content to be posted, reviewed, downloaded, installed, collected, and shared for every game that would support user generated content. The *Steam Workshop* was free for all games, with no purchase or donate ability in *Steam Workshop* at this time. There was another feature at this time called the *Community Marketplace* where in-game goods could be bought and sold. This was later extended to include some user generated content for some games, but never more than a special gun, model, or other game assets. In 2015 when paid mods launched,

Steam was the dominant store and platform on PC with little competition. Valve had secured a place of dominance in the PC gaming and modding culture. Valve was in a position to harvest as they have in the past the PC gamer culture they work hard to cultivate. It made a lot of sense for this to happen with Valve on the Steam platform because of the way Steam had grown. Perhaps it did not make as much sense that they would do this with *Skyrim*, a game that at the time had been modded for five years with an established community culture, and was (and still is) the most modded game of all time (Nexus Mods, "Welcome").

The Paid Mods Problem

Several contemporary media scholars including Merrin, Jenkins, and Bruns highlight the importance of foregrounding the convergence and hybridity of digital exchanges. In light of the changes that continue to be ushered in by digital distribution and online collaboration, hybridity of authorship is a vital concept to explore as a site of cultural meaning, expression, profit, and power. Game mods in particular represent a hybrid space where the agency and perspectives of producers and consumers meet, interact, and modify one another. This co-authoring is exemplified in what T.L. Taylor terms *the assemblage of play* (331). Taylor leverages the existing framework of assemblage from science and technology studies to explore the relationships of sociality, game experience, and technology together as the assemblage of gameplay. In an examination of multiplayer online games, Taylor highlights the exchange and contributions of players in building their gameplay as active agents in the construction of the experience. In this way, Taylor suggests games are co-authored as the player engages in building gameplay (2009, 336). Players are bringing their experiences, perspectives, and abilities into play with the

affordances of the systems and representations. I hypothesise that the popularity of moddable games like *Skyrim*, which provide affordances for user-created content, reflect the desires of experienced players to expand and enjoy these products beyond the initial gameplay delineations set by the developer. Modders exercise emergent mastery with mod tools which in turn creates cultural power, and modding allows players to further engage with the kinds of authorship practices that they already enjoy during actual gameplay. In my analysis, I identify key elements of this practice, and explore how these elements might inform game design and development practices to effectively leverage the “playbour” of modding (Kücklich).

A key element to consider is the cultural power and internalised or near-intrinsic motivations of modders. Some mod authors, companies, players, and other stakeholders have believed modders add value to a product’s value proposition in a quantifiable way. According to Todd Howard, lead designer of *Skyrim* in November of 2016, *Skyrim* had sold 30 million copies since its 2011 release, and is also one of the most heavily modded games of all time with over 62,820 mods on the *Skyrim* Nexus community site at the time of writing (Nexus Mods, “Welcome”). This financially successful game and active modding community is at the center of the controversy I will be examining. The monetary value of game mods to a game company is speculative, and hard to reliably quantify. However, it is clear in looking at the Entertainment Software Association data that games which allow for user created content to be built and distributed perform well beyond their base value proposition (Entertainment Software Association “Annual Report 2015”). The somewhat unquantified monetary value of game mods for *Skyrim* is produced mostly by the voluntary labour of mod authors. This leads to a question of monetary compensation for modder

efforts, since they increase the monetary success of the game. However, when direct monetary compensation was attempted in the case of *Skyrim* on April 23rd 2015, it was met with motivated opposition in the form of significant backlash and conflict from a community divided in opinion. Daniel James Joseph codified these sides in the same *Reddit AMA* dataset I am using for my research as “the “discourse of the consumer” and “the discourse of community” (699)

The discourse of the consumer speaks to, and about, the subject position of being a consumer of modifications. It is mobilized not only by consumers but also by those who describe themselves as mod developers when talking about their audience. It foregrounds the possibility of the *Steam* marketplace being flooded with indistinguishable, voluminous mods of dubious value. It is interested in the “openness” of the mod community as a source of value for good mods, and it assumes a baseline of freedom to consume, at-will, with full control over any mod at any time free of charge.

In the discourse of the community, the idea of the community is mobilized rhetorically as a kind of “royal we.” The community is described in various ways, but most often as holistic, genuine, open, and willing to work collectively through problems. Because of the paid mods program, the community is regularly described as under threat. My argument is that the contradictions on display in both of these discourses arise due to similar structural circumstances that inform similar debates about indie versus mainstream game development and radical versus liberal conceptions of institutional change. (Joseph 698)

These discourses are relevant and readily observable but moreover, are felt and apparent, including in daily discourses on community forums that I participated in as a *Skyrim* modder. During this period of the *Steam/Skyrim* Mods monetization the tension of those discourses and power structures of the subculture erupted. Lines were drawn, and deeply debated. Conflict was open around ownership, appropriation, ethics, financial motivation poisoning the intrinsic engagement, and leadership seated atop social capital now threatened by corporate dollars. There was a disconnect between the offering’s value

proposition, cultural power structures, community values, and the way in which mods are actually created, not by mod creators at all, but by communities, and often informal groups of authors. Is the *Skyrim* mod monetization incident then a fundamental misunderstanding of what participatory cultural production is and how it works? Is this a flashpoint in the tension between play and power in games, gamer and modder fan cultures, and the corporate-run, profit-designed artifacts and intellectual properties on which these communities are built? What can this controversy tell us about participatory production and fandoms in other media? My thesis work seeks to explore these questions through qualitative textual analysis of the *Reddit.com AMA* with Gabe Newell on April 25, 2015. I will be examining how modding was expressed by this particular group of modders, as evidenced by the content of their online discourse. I will do this with the comments made directly in the thread of Newell's posts, and those which were upvoted by a vocal minority participating segment of the *Skyrim* modder community. Selecting based on relevance to my theoretical frames will further filter this forum dataset toward specifically exploring the notion of modding as play. I will further examine how the existing scholarship outlining concepts of produsage, assemblage of play, and playbour might help to interpret this case and the volatile reactions of modder subculture to this monetisation. This builds from my own hypothesis that the Valve appropriation of fan production, produsage, and participatory production is not simply the commodification of the participatory production. Rather, it is an unintentional commodification of gameplay itself, where modding can be understood as an extension of play.

Research Context and Literature Review

In order to situate my research on participatory game production subculture and the monetization of game mods inside the existing work in the field of game studies, I will be investigating existing literature concerning online paradigms of participation in media. I will contextualise and provide a rationale for the need to look critically at the notion of monetizing participatory production with games, in order to obtain greater understanding about convergence culture, free labour, and motivation for participating fans. This literature review starts with literature in areas concerning participation in modding, modding in terms of motivations for mod community members, and issues associated with the 'free labour' of modding. I intend to identify gaps in existing research on these topics, highlighting the lack of research into player engagement and motivation in modding communities of practice. I will appraise the methods employed in the works examined and reflect on the merits of these methods as applicable to my own research.

With the help of existing literature from media studies around online paradigms of participation in media, this research will explore the cultural resistance to monetizing mods from modding communities. More consideration is needed on issues involving convergence culture, free labour, and motivation for fan participation specifically in the context of online PC games. Research is needed to understand these issues in addition to the existing literature around participatory production. Game studies contains many works which focus on participation in modding, specifically in terms of the motivations of modders from a cultural standpoint. I have identified a gap in considering playbour (Kücklich), the assemblage of play (Taylor) and play as produsage (Bruns,"Produsage")

in the existing research involving the culture of modders that could inform the larger questions in media studies that involve incentivising participatory digital culture. By applying these theoretical frames I hope to uncover new insights around the discourse in the *Reddit.com AMA* and this particular watershed moment for mod culture.

The specific theoretical frames I have chosen shape my discourse analysis and address the potential relationship of modding to play, a current gap I have identified in existing research. The first theory I will base my analysis on is from Julian Kücklich who describes the concept of playbour, a hybrid form of play and labour that is meant to indicate free labour that fits neither traditional definitions of work nor traditional categories of play or leisure (1). This theory troubles a point of conflict in the modding debates in which modding is seen less as a leisure activity and more as labour, and labour that many believe should be extrinsically compensated. The concept of modding as play in playbour is further informed by TL Taylor's assemblage of play which leverages the existing framework of assemblage from science and technology studies to explore the relationships of sociality, game experience, and technology together as the assemblage of gameplay. This is relevant to modding as well, where there is engagement by modders in community relationships, experience of creation, and technology as in TL Taylor's assemblage of play (331). On the labour side of playbour or participatory production, Axel Bruns's concept of produsage ("Produsage" 1) is useful to understanding the discourse here. Produsage is a framework for user-led content creation to deal with the systemic problems associated with translating industrial ideas of content creation with social software. This helps to reconcile the difference modders may perceive between the production output of modding as conventional work requiring some monetary

compensation with their experience participating in modding as an intrinsically satisfying activity which results in a product of potential monetary value. Using produsage as a lens in this way will help me analyze the 157 Q&A filtered posts in my dataset to shape new answers.

Looking at the methods used by scholars in the study of mods and modders, they often use interview methods with participants who are members of mod communities or otherwise involved in the participatory production activity being studied. This is a very effective way of conducting discourse analysis, and engaging with active user model theories in a qualitative way (Andrus). These interviews are a resource for my contribution as studies that I can reference, rather than try to recreate. The discourse I am looking at is within a specific and controlled time period, and the perceptions and discourse in the modding subculture around mods and monetization have changed somewhat. Therefore, I feel that avoiding conducting interviews and surveys at this point would be better in order to maximize relevancy and minimize redundancy. Instead, content and discourse analysis combined with my own reflection will provide new insights by analysing the *AMA* posts through the unique lens of the theoretical frames I have selected. This differs from methods employed in existing research, adds to the existing work based on interviews, and constrains my research to the time period of the *Skyrim* mod monetization between April 23rd 2015 and April 28th 2015 and specifically the *Reddit.com AMA* with Gabe Newell on April 25 2015 in particular as the source material for my analysis.

This is a contribution I am well suited for due to my existing experience with modding. I believe that combining this first-hand perspective on existing research with content analysis and discourse analysis will be an effective triangulated approach for

exploring questions of how modding is expressed by this particular group of modders, as evidenced in this *Reddit.com AMA* and exploring how the concepts of produsage, assemblage of play, and playbour might help us interpret this case and the reactions of modder subculture to this monetisation.

Participatory Industry of Online Media

One of the key factors in looking at media today is the participatory nature of online media. Important works in this area of research are those of Jenkins and Terranova on convergence culture and free labour respectively (Jenkins, *Fans*; Terranova). Jenkins starts his article with an anecdote about the rampant agency and born-global nature of online media, stating that convergence culture is "...where old and new media collide, where grassroots and corporate media intersect, where the power of the media producer and the power of the media consumer interact in unpredictable ways" (*Fans 2*). This is a similar definition to Terranova's 'free labour.' Free labour on the Net includes the activity of building Web sites, modifying software packages, reading and participating in mailing lists, and building virtual spaces on MUDs and MOOs (Terranova 33). Although Terranova opts to focus on specific technologies, she and Jenkins are in agreement that the participatory online platforms and the co-authorship of media are both in a participatory space driven by value produced by users. These two authors approach two separate but related problems in a way which, when seen together, help to form a picture of cause and effect, which is important for my own research on modder culture.

Terranova describes a digital economy where "production and consumption are reconfigured[,]" but is careful to state that "[t]he Internet does not automatically turn every

user into an active producer, and every worker into a creative subject” (35). She argues that the digital economy works in tandem with late capitalism, and that free labour is entertainment to the participants, even for those involved in countercultural movements and reappropriation of the fruits of that production. She outlines a new ‘Knowledge Class’ and how different people are allowed to participate to varying degrees, forming new power structures. Those who know how to mod a digital game, for example, can participate and play in ways other players can not. When that becomes known to the other players, they might be motivated to pursue that power by gaining the skills necessary to mod. Terranova elaborates on this by saying,

If this population of Internet users is largely made up of “knowledge workers,” then it matters whether these are seen as the owners of elitist cultural and economic power or the avant-garde of new configurations of labour that do not automatically guarantee elite status (34).

She goes on to problematize this further by exploring the concept of collective intelligence, where the internet is a ‘hive mind’ that is self organizing and where power is fluid and based on degrees of relevance. This self-organising power shifting is prone to manipulation by those with the power to be heard the most. Therefore, Terranova argues, collective intelligence normalises capitalism and supports a knowledge economy on which late capitalism is sustained (33). She supports Jenkins’ work by exploring participation in terms of “free labor,” illustrating the relationship between commercial media and the production of content by consumers. Terranova arrives at some key statements which tie free labour to convergence: “[u]sers keep a site alive through their labor, the cumulative hours of accessing the site (thus generating advertising), writing messages, participating in conversations, and sometimes making the jump to collaborators” (40). This participation

or 'free labour of knowledge workers to create ephemeral commodities' are the same participatory actions indicated by Jenkins in exploring the result of this free labour—convergence and participatory culture.

Jenkins talks about the convergence of various old media forms in terms of how they are used online as participatory media. He echoes Terranova's perspective on the relationship of the participatory co-authorship of cultural artifacts and the blending of media power dynamics, saying "[p]roducers who fail to make their peace with this new participatory culture will face declining goodwill and diminished revenues. The resulting struggles and compromises will define the public culture of the future" (Jenkins, *Fans* 244). Jenkins discusses how anyone can contribute to existing media by way of an example in which a video can be made of an image, which can then be written about, which someone could then incorporate into a video, which could then be used as part of an advertisement (*Fans* 245). All of those transmedia affordances are a result of the interactions described by Terranova as free labour. In this way, these authors form a causal relationship in their theories around participatory engagement and the culture it creates. Jenkins talks candidly about his personal experiences in the introduction to this book and draws on these examples to illustrate what his concept of convergence means. At the same time he is illustrating Terranova's free labour and knowledge industry at work in each example. The two are linked in such a way that convergence cannot be discussed without participatory culture or 'free labour'.

Jenkins and Terranova are looking broadly at the internet and all digital media. They use examples of media and commercial appropriation to frame the new discourse of the online media paradigm. They address issues of authorship, ownership, and power in

broad strokes. To explore the implications of these theories, more specific and focused methods will be needed. The nature of digital games and their co-authored nature would make a good case study with which to test these theories, as online transmedia participation around games is an exemplar of convergence and free labour. Games are where these theories are being enacted in a clearly observable space and to some of the most intense degrees. Online PC games and mods will serve as foci for these larger media studies issues, especially in terms of understanding what drives them.

The discourse around modding work as play is built through experimentation with transmedia, and through PC games which have affordances for modding. Game studies already explores play and the co-created nature of play in the relationship of game developers and players through games. According to T.L. Taylor, the player assembles their own experience in tandem with the rules and challenges presented by game developers to create an experience. A game does not exist without a player to participate in creating the experience (Taylor). Thus games, thanks to their participatory nature, are one of the guideposts toward understanding the issues of today's media ecology, specifically those of convergence and the participatory 'digital economy' (Terranova 40). Play, and more specifically ludic play, is a driving force behind participatory media and gift economies. To explore co-authorship, participatory production and online media in the context of PC game mods, it is also important to look at other key cultural aspects of digital games.

Agency, Participation, and Games

There are reasons why communities and individuals participate in the production of content outside of paid labour. Participation can be a subversive or transgressive action, like hacking, griefing, cheating, and otherwise breaking the rules of the game or community (Consalvo). Media scholar Mia Consalvo talks about how some of the cheating in a game is defined by the affordances of the game, but how the rest is negotiated by the community. Sometimes it is not considered cheating to look for a walkthrough, depending on the game, the culture around the game, and the cheating action. In my role as a game player, I have seen that it is not widely considered cheating to look up the best items, or best point distribution for a character in *World of Warcraft*. Doing so allows players to know what the best combinations are before fighting a major battle in a team where others are counting on you to know what to do and when. Looking up the best equipment and point distributions to beat a difficult part in *Dark Souls*, on the other hand, would be considered cheating by most. For players of *World of Warcraft*, participation in creating online resources carries a lot of value aligned with the intended use of the game and is not transgressive. The game is expected to be played through this transmedia mode due to the affordances of the PC platform, the online play, and the cooperative nature of the gameplay. It is a collaborative exercise, rather than the mostly single player, puzzle-like mode of the *Dark Souls* game series.

Consalvo also notes from Lawrence Lessig that the effect of affordance being a guideline for determining what is cheating turns code writers into lawmakers (85). Thus, one could really break the 'law' by making new 'laws' through game mods. We see this in the community negotiation around mods and cheating. This may present appeal for

modders as appropriation or power play for modders in the interplay of gamers and the game industry. In some PC games, if mods are enabled, the player cannot progress. In others if mods are enabled, you can progress, but achievements cannot be unlocked. In the latter, there are mods then created to circumvent this limitation, allowing a modded game to unlock achievements at the platform level. This could be considered cheating, but some users argue that they are only using cosmetic mods, which do not alter the difficulty of the game and therefore should not be locked out of the ability to gain achievements during play.

Being a maker and breaker of code, and thereby rules and law as Lessig says, is motivating as a kind of power through production (McGonigal 55). Jane McGonigal also notes that players and people want to have that sense of accomplishment and will strive to be a part of satisfying work, and work that involves a social connection (McGonigal 78). This is similar in application of agency and social capital for the coders, modders, and the people who leverage them. By building mods, to enable cheating or otherwise, a creator of those mods is participating in a satisfying, connected project which will have an impact. McGonigal looks at games and gamification as solutions to real world problems. Perhaps a relevant application of this thinking is the motivations and game-ness of mods, and the participatory production of content for games as ludic labour. To explore this notion further, I look toward the research on PC game mods directly.

Mod Games Mod Culture

A mod in the context of a PC game is a module or modification created by fans for a commercial game by hacking or by using modding tools provided by the publisher. This

could be a simple edit to loot lists of stats for a game object, or new assets like sounds, models, textures, and interface changes. Still larger examples include those elements combined to make new characters, items, abilities, maps or dungeons, and quests. Larger still are mods which combine several aforementioned elements to create new groups of content enhancing nearly everything in the game as a layer of graphics, balance, or content. Other large mods will combine even more mods together to form new adventures within the game world's context like *Falskar* or *Elsweyr* for *Skyrim*, or be released as a departure for the original context as a standalone game, called a total conversion. These larger mods use a different file format in *Skyrim* modding called a Master File (ESM) which can then itself support other mods. So, a mod of *Skyrim* can be built to itself be modded by smaller mods. All of the mods in *Skyrim* can be loaded in various load orders to remix the changes from the mods according to the user's tastes and the compatibility limitations of the various mods. *Skyrim's* mod architecture, like other Bethesda titles such as *Fallout 4* that use the same approach, is the most flexible and robust for this combining affordance, in comparison to the many other PC games I have modded.

This is a form of co-created derivative work in the spirit of remix culture, which is prevalent in the digital economy (Banks). Mods have been explored as free labour by several scholars, some of whom also look at the motivations of modders. Looking at motivations for those who participate most in the free labour of the digital economy is useful in the interests of facilitating engagement with media, or to encourage more people to overcome the barriers to their participation. Modding PC games is accessible because games are already participatory, and modding communities have a very specific and active co-authorship subculture.

In “*Of Mods and Modders: Chasing Down the Value of Fan-Based Digital Game Modifications*,” Hector Postigo explores the impact modding has on the commercial and critical success of a game (301). Postigo looks at free labour issues and modding value in relation to the game industry. He looks specifically at the impact of modding on the longevity of a game’s popularity and sales success. Postigo says that this is problematic; “[i]n trying to estimate the value added to commercial games by the work of fan-programmers, one encounters several methodological obstacles” (300). This is like many other factors in marketing where the value as perceived by the consumer or player supersedes the actual value when considering outcomes.

Olli Sotamaa’s article *When the Game Is Not Enough: Motivations and Practices Among Computer Game Modding Culture* looks at the motivations of modding. He says modding could be a result of the game not being enough to entertain seasoned PC gamers without added layers of ludic engagement. He also looks at the value of modding and its impact on game development and the commercial success of the modded games. He sees value in modding and tackles copyright of the intellectual property of mods as well as industry valuation of mods as follows, “[a]s long as the game industry can preserve the situation in which mod makers are happy to work for free the developers and the publishers can clearly benefit from selling the retail titles needed for playing the modifications” (Sotamaa 244). However, despite this statement (and other of Sotamaa’s various observations and assertions) being cited in the work of many other scholars, this rhetoric of exploitation is not supported from a professional developer standpoint in my experience. Mod tools and affordances cost development money, and community support is an ongoing cost for developers and publishers. The perception of mods as part of a

game's features is only applicable to those with the skill and hardware to employ them, and not applicable to the majority of players. This discourse of free labour value which lacks the context of production considerations is echoed in Postigo's work (301).

Nathaniel Poor's *Computer Game Modders' Motivations and Sense of Community: A Mixed-Methods Approach* has a more current vocabulary and tone toward the motivations of modders when compared with the other two articles. Both Postigo's and Sotamaa's articles are cited in Poor's article, and Poor builds on their work. Poor is much less concerned with the overall motivations of modders or the participatory or convergence issues. He is more interested in the social aspects of online communities. Poor is in opposition to the industry power issues which were a focus for Postigo and Sotamaa. Poor states: "[t]he focus on the 'free labor' or exploitation of modders' work may need further investigation, given modders' stress on modding for fun but not the industry" (1264). In line with this, Poor later notes that, "[a]lthough the initial questions were set up as a contrast between three related items (the self, the community, and the game company), with hindsight it is not completely clear how different modders might construct 'for the game company'" (1265). This echoes Jenkins and other more recent scholarship by backing away from Terranova, Postigo, and Sotamaa's assumptions about the 'value' of mods and other fan production from an industry or economic perspective of 'free labour.' Modders and other knowledge workers in the digital economy who provide free labour do not necessarily perceive it as labour, nor do the commercial developers perceive it as free (Poor 1265).

Sotamaa and Postigo both look at the motivator of employment through modding; they show through their respondents and other sources that modders are motivated to

mod because they feel the work might result in “a job in the lucrative digital game design industry” (Postigo 310). Poor shows in his data that this is not the case, which is closer to expected results, but is also a product of Poor’s work being much more recent. The discourse in modder culture has matured with awareness around the prospects of employment and what is required for game industry jobs. But if this is true, why was there such backlash about getting paid for *Skyrim* mods by Bethesda and Valve? I intend to uncover more detail here by using these existing understandings and research materials to inform a study of the discourse of a specific event, the monetization of *Skyrim* mods, and the *Reddit.com* AMA with Gabe Newell in particular.

The existing research on mods usually shows indications that modders mod for fun (Postigo, Poor, Sotamaa). This is a common theme in many aspects of the interviews in the above research. While it is addressed by each author to a degree, they do not explore it in depth as it is not in support of their arguments. Their combined data shows a pattern which informs the roots of participatory production as a ludic endeavor. Postigo, Poor, and Sotamaa all describe the personal fun of extending and enhancing the game experience. These studies also show data supporting the notion of the game itself motivating activities outside of intended play. This is plausible as a direction for further study considering people’s fixation on fun and games. We are a playful species, and those who game and engage in modding are perhaps true examples of ‘homo ludens’ or “people as players” (Huizinga and Hull). This application of a ludic perspective of free labour is supported by the respondents in all three studies by Sotamaa, Postigo, and Poor. I can hypothesise from the existing research in this area that free labour is not labour at all, but an extension of the magic circle (Caillois) or an assemblage of play (Taylor). The game is

extended in this way, including its assemblage of play, into the meta-social game of transmedia and participation in the online digital space, and is recognised in the subcultures around digital games as such, knowingly by participants and beneficiaries or not.

***Skyrim* Mods and Mod Monetization**

There are currently a few existing scholarly works that specifically take up *Skyrim* mods, mod communities, and monetization. Gallagher et al. write about the history of *The Elder Scrolls* (TES) franchise which *Skyrim* belongs to, and the role modders and the mod community have had in shaping it. The authors acknowledge methodological concerns stemming from the prevalence of pseudonyms on fan sites. The concern comes from not being able to trace the validity of the text, where a single user could use multiple accounts to manipulate the dialog. They also note that the way modders come and go from the modding scene makes them hard to trace. I agree, and will not trace specific individual modders in my work with the exception of validated accounts for key figures in the *Reddit AMA*. Gallagher et al. convincingly show the importance of modders for *TES: Skyrim*, and Bethesda. They provide a helpful account of the TES games, the company Bethesda, and some of the cultural power exchanges, but do not look in depth at the issue of monetization, certainly not in terms of appropriation or modding as an assemblage or extension of play.

“Modders of *Skyrim*: Motivations and Modifications” by Eleonora Hackman and Ulfrik Björkqvist considers the various motivations for why modders mod. This is understandably a helpful study in characterising modding as play, and a useful support for

my framework. The authors touch on modder culture briefly, but do not touch on the monetization issue, as the paper was published in 2014, before the paid mod controversy. The methodology consists of interviews and subsequent analysis which I intend to reference for my own exploration of modding as play.

The Discourse of Digital Dispossession: Paid Modifications and Community Crisis on Steam” by Daniel James Joseph deals directly with the monetization event concerning *Skyrim* and *Steam*. This paper is a key resource for my discussion of monetization as appropriation, albeit with a different theoretical framework and perspective. The paper addresses modding as play too, but disagrees saying:

Some have suggested that the coming century will be defined by games, with games playing a larger role in society and business. As Zimmerman and Chaplin (2013) wrote, “As more people play more deeply in the Ludic Century, the lines will become increasingly blurred between game players and game designers.” (Joseph 692)

Joseph goes on to disagree with this prediction of increasingly blurred lines because of the social power structures in gamer culture, among other factors. Similar to my own research design, Joseph has employed discourse analysis of *Reddit posts*, and works with existing theories to understand why the paid mods program was rejected by the community. The paper provides the helpful perspective of monetization of game mods as appropriation using his lens of accumulation by disposition.

My research builds on this growing body of existing work, but is different in scope and focus. I am focusing on the *Reddit AMA* with Gabe Newell for discourse analysis, rather than the discourse across many sources and from other key perspectives including those found on *NexusMods* and *Polygon*. While appropriation is certainly central to the

backlash of paid *Skyrim* mods on the *Steam* platform, I focus more on why this is appropriation in the first place, by examining the underlying factors at play in mod communities which make that social power structure work and resulting conflict possible. I also focus on the theory that along with these studies on modder culture and even dealing with this case of monetization of mods for *Skyrim* comes a misunderstanding around the activity of modding, informed by my own experience as a modder. These are questions not asked by these authors because they are presumably not game designers themselves, and have never made mods for *Skyrim*. I see evidence of modding framed in modder culture as something more than participatory production and commodification, appropriation, or produsage alone. Experience as a modder reveals insight into the activity of modding and brings me to question modding as the assemblage or extension of the gameplay itself, which informs my content analysis and discourse analysis, and builds on this growing body of existing work. This introduces biases in a number of ways which are to be disclosed in my point of enunciation section in the next chapter, where I reflect on my experience and how that experience affects my predisposition relative to this research.

There is much written about game mods, participatory production, and even specifically *Skyrim*. My research subject and methods are informed by fundamental theories in game studies and media studies, and explore topics of current importance and interest to scholars publishing in the field both in terms of mods, and this case study of *Skyrim* and monetization of mods in particular. My approach builds on a growing body of existing work, and adds new first-hand perspectives, while contributing a new lens for understanding the idea of modding as an extension or assemblage of play.

Theoretical Framework

Point of Enunciation

My point of enunciation is intertwined with this topic in complex ways. I am a modder, and a professional game designer. I have worked in the game industry for many years on a number of top-selling titles in a variety of production roles. I have created and contributed to several mods for many iconic games throughout game history, beginning with *Doom* in 1993. I have also made mods for *Skyrim*, and have been modding Bethesda games since 1998. In addition, I have been a member of the Nexus since 2001, which is the modding community central to the game *Skyrim*. This firsthand experience and passion for the activity of modding is what has inspired me to question what elements are at play in this practice and in this subculture.

In addition to the perspective of a practitioner, I have also studied and taught post-secondary courses on game design theory and game studies for over a decade. These experiences have given me a firm understanding of the foundational theories and insights in areas of game design, production, and game studies. Through the critical perspective of game studies, coupled with the insider knowledge of a member of the modder community, and informed by the experiences of being a professional game designer for high budget game productions, I see opportunities to contribute to this area of research from a uniquely nuanced perspective which I do not see currently represented in existing scholarly works. I bring a deep understanding of game authorship and engagement from many angles, and this research will be a fitting extension and synthesis of this breadth of experience.

This perspective invites considerations of bias and limitations. Through participation in modding activities and my position as an active member of the Nexus Mods community I have personally felt and observed modder culture and modding practice in ways not addressed in previous research. This experience is knowledge, but I must be vigilant in not extending my own experience to other contexts or persons directly or uncritically. My own experience does not represent some truth or insight for the community as a whole, or represent a variety of experiences with the practice of modding. Instead, I will utilize these experiences to inform my research questions and hypotheses, which I will expand upon using the insights of theoretical frames and carefully considered methods to supplement my own experiences.

Monetization and Appropriation

Even after the events of the *Reddit.com AMA* with Valve CEO Gabe Newell addressing the backlash toward mod monetization, there continue to be ventures targeting monetization of participatory production- other areas in which there is an attempt to leverage agency and participation as emotional investment not dissimilar from modding. The game industry creates spaces, affordances in a game's system design, and even tools in their offerings where their fans can lean in (Postigo) and fill in gaps or provide improvements or expansions to a game in many ways. Examples of this are forums, walkthroughs, and even in-game production like 'notes' left in *Dark Souls* for other players, an in-game mechanic where players leave digital game clues for other players to find. I continue to engage as a participant in mod communities building mods for popular games, including *Skyrim*. Other scholars have explored these tensions between industry and gamer culture (Engenfeldt-Nelson et al. 167). Axel Bruns for example uses the concept of

produsage to deal with the systemic problems associated with translating industrial ideas of content creation with social software (Bruns “Produsage”). I have observed through my career that mods for an otherwise solitary game like *Skyrim* create far more social engagement. Leveraging this social emotional engagement can be a significant differentiator in the value perception for gamers. This social value alone in terms of engagement, regardless of quantity, quality, or monetization of the mods themselves, directly improves sales.

To explore modder culture, monetization, and modding as play, I examine aspects of gamer culture, industry perspectives, and participatory production as play. I bring my unique perspective and experiences, combined with theoretical insights from game studies, in order to explore the discourse around the initial launch of paid mods for *Skyrim* by Bethesda Softworks and Valve in 2015. Public writings of key stakeholders at the time, forum postings from the community, official statements by companies, and the media coverage surrounding the events are used to shed light on how companies with extensive experience and past successes in serving this community could put forth an offering that was received so poorly. This should not only provide for better understanding of potential business approaches for this space, but more crucially, uncover cultural elements of gamer and mod communities which have been misinterpreted. Understanding these cultural elements better also informs better understandings of other fandoms and participatory online communities in other media. Looking at game mods can reveal what elements of play, work, and social power are important when looking at participatory production, and the potential drawbacks of monetizing these.

PC Game Mods and Mod Culture

Mods are an exceptional example of the issues of social economy intersecting with corporate financial power. Mods are a product of participatory ludic playbour (Kücklich), like other media, but have some properties which make game mods unique. The subcultural community and technological affordances of computer games (PC games) stand out from other media in terms of participatory labour. The PC games platform is a tool for authoring digital games of all kinds. PCs are also a primary means of connecting to the internet where other information related to a game can be found, and discussed. This online affordance facilitates easy distribution, and promotion of PC games and any of their derivative works. In today's online digital media landscape, co-authorship, convergence, and participatory engagement with media are dominating older broadcast media in modern countries (Merrin; Jenkins, *Convergence*). Even those who would rather not subscribe to online media discourse find it increasingly difficult to avoid participatory media, which enforces structures they might oppose (Humphreys). Fan access to both the means of media production and distribution shifts the voice, and power of that voice into a shared space online (Jenkins, *Fans*). Digital games exemplify this participation through the nature of the assemblage of gameplay (Taylor).

To inform the future of this shift in online media, we must explore its leading edge. PC games are distinct from analog, console, casual, social, mobile, and portable games. PC games are played on the same device used to create them. This means the tools to create the game could run on the same platform as the game, as intended by the game developers and publishers. New tools built by the mod community or repurposing existing tools can also be used to modify the PC game's code, or intervene in the game's execution

and to insert desired alterations unintended by developers. PC games can be modified more easily than games on any other platform because PCs are the tools used to build games. This creates unique affordances which have been leveraged, since the first distributed video game ever, *Spacewar!* on the PDP-1 Computer (Egenfeldt-Nelson et al. 51). PC games are an example of how participation, convergence, and other participatory engagement interact with a medium. Looking at the modding of PC games and monetization of PC games as participatory production and ludic labour are ideal ways for exploring convergence and participatory engagement with media in general.

Games, Mods, and Media are Interdisciplinary

Media studies is a vast and inherently interdisciplinary field, the complexity of which is amplified by the internet's impact on the world which it studies. Online media, with all of the affordances and resistances they bring, affect all media studies sub-disciplines in some way. This interconnectedness makes media today even more interdisciplinary than they have been in the past. Media studies has been traditionally focused "mostly on the cultural and discursive issues of power in the production and consumption of media" (Hall). This includes not only the intersectionality of race, gender, status, and ability, but also critical scholarship of the shifting media forms themselves. What was once a one-directional relationship of producer to consumer is now most often a multifaceted multidirectional interweaving of symbiotic production, consumption, remix, and appropriation.

Media of all varieties are undergoing this culturally and technologically driven change. Many media industries are currently in the process of an uncomfortable

metamorphosis as the old codes and constructs are challenged and new ones emerge as chimeras of those which they have replaced. Such a transition can be witnessed in a shift from physical video rental services like Blockbuster to digital streaming 'platforms' like YouTube or Netflix, to offer just one example. McLuhan warned of the dangers of basing our understanding of the current paradigm of media on what has already passed. To address one of McLuhan's most famous quotes, "the medium is the message" (126); a key message of the medium right now is to reconsider the outdated binary of producer and consumer still traced in both media studies and popular understandings, in light of the disruptions to the model that digital media have brought. Describing the nuance of how production and consumption are presently enacted, rather than how they have changed, is an important distinction.

Media of today are not direct iterations of existing forms of media. They are not simply more TV channels or colour print over black ink. Online media like Youtube are mixed media as video, but even more so with the addition of live streams with interaction from a live audience. These media are also instantly global, and can be produced and distributed by almost anyone (Merrin). This breaks many of the old theories about media in the face of new transmedia discourse, dangers, and opportunities along shifting lines of power, identity, and cultural understanding (Jenkins, *Fans*). As media of all kinds are increasingly delivered online or in transmediated modes, there are similarities which can now be seen more clearly. There were and still are vast differences between newspapers and news magazines, but in the online context, both are affected by Twitter and blogs in similar ways (Petrovic et. al). In the context of the online media ecology, new patterns such as digital transmediation and convergence can be used to help us understand what

is happening in the rapidly evolving discourse around digital media online. This is the leading edge of media studies today; the quest to understand how we co-create and actively engage with media. This understanding is key to evaluating several other concepts, including intersectionality, representation, identity, and cultural issues in media.

Key Theory: Prodsusage

Axel Bruns's theory of prodsusage is meant to overcome the media production problems which have arisen with user production online. This theory reflected a shift in game production in 2007, and many if not all elements identified in the theory have continued to be factors in participatory online production, and concerns for companies engaged in media production and distribution. Prodsusage is an extension of earlier theories and terms such as Alvin Toffler's idea of the 'prosumer' (Toffler). Prosumers are more informed and involved media enthusiasts; an influential target market with value in their ability to persuade other media consumers, contribute to media, or even create media, rather than simply serve as the industrial age concept of consumers as an endpoint. The industries around media production and consumption in the 1970s and 80s began to respond to this more participatory market with more on-demand and custom made tiers of premium products, which signaled an early shift toward user production far before digital distribution. Prodsusage is also built on Charles Leadbeater's idea of a 'pro-am' company (Bruns, "Prodsusage" 2). A pro-am company is one in which the business model shifts toward a collaboration with consumers to include them in developing new or improved products and services. This is now increasingly manifest in consumer categories like the community manager, early adopter, open beta, community leaders, product champion programs, and so on.

Producership is described as the collaborative and inherently hybrid role of the active consumer "...where usage is necessarily also productive: participants are *producers*."

These producers engage not in a traditional form of content production, but are instead involved in producership – the collaborative and continuous building and extending of existing content in pursuit of further improvement. (Bruns, "Producership" 3)

The theory of producership undeniably encompasses the modding phenomenon. I have experienced modding as a consumer and producer for years exactly as Bruns describes. I would certainly identify as a 'producer', and agree that to produce mods one needs to use them. Out of all the literature I have reviewed in these years exploring modding as an extension of play, this theory resonates most strongly with my experience in modding and modder culture. Bruns further describes four characteristics of producership: a shift from formal production teams to community participants, participation in varying expertise and roles, products being always unfinished and under development, and engagement based more on merit than on copyright and legal ownership (3). These characteristics are also central to modding and similar user-led content creation. A mod is built continuously, is never finished, and is often in constant negotiation between dependence and compatibility with other mods, and compatibility or dependence on new patch versions of the game. Modders fluidly move between conventional roles of media production and distribution. They might be a professional programmer by day, making them an authority in coding their mod, but will then be faced with support requests, community engagement, asset production, or other tasks where they are suddenly an amateur, just as Bruns describes. When it comes to engagement in the community of modders, there is far less emphasis on copyright and ownership and far more on merit. Companies which support modding for

their games must also allow modders to operate with an exemption from the usual corporate legal procedures required to defend intellectual property which are regularly employed between game industry corporations.

Another important part of Bruns's produsage theory is related to J.C. Herz's theory of 'harnessing the hive' (5) in which she describes user and commercial creative industry practices. Bruns uses Herz's term to describe the hive-like interaction of produsage with media industry, and how the industry works with the artefacts and practices of participatory production. One of these modes which Bruns names 'hijacking the hive' ("Produsage" 5) can be read as describing the monetization of *Skyrim* mods, and advising against it, seven years beforehand.

Hijacking the hive: combining the worst aspects of harvesting and harbouring, this practice deliberately aims to achieve lock-in of produsage communities for financial gain. (Bruns, "Produsage" 5)

This hijacking of the hive almost seems to prophesize what would be the divisive effects of monetizing *Skyrim* mods. In my analysis of the Gabe Newell *Reddit AMA* posts, I used the theory of produsage to explore whether the elements of this theory are apparent. I searched for discourse around the communal sharing of intellectual property, interdependence of mods, role and expertise fluidity, and negotiation around the concepts of product, user, and production. This has informed my research around mod monetization and participatory production in the context of exploring how modding is expressed by this particular group of modders, and help explore how produsage might help us interpret this case and the reactions of modder subculture to this monetisation. The impetus for this work is a strong one; as Bruns says, as the trends of produsage continue and user content

creation becomes more prevalent, it will become a “...paradigm shift with profound and far-reaching implications” (“Producersage” 6)

Key Theory: Playbour

Playbour speaks directly to modding as an extension of play and seeks to articulate the relationship of participatory production of mods to the industry and industrial concepts of labour and market value (Kücklich). Kücklich describes playbour as a mix of play and labour which is something I am interested in as a modder practitioner, as well as a researcher wishing to explore broader modder sentiment. The concept and elements of playbour resonate with my experience and insight, even though the inferences Kücklich makes arguably prove problematic.

For Kücklich, playbour concerns a growing player base that is not content to sit back and consume, but rather to actively engage in creation. He talks about modding as a form of social capital, or the value of interpersonal relationships in social groups, and resultant cooperation and reciprocity gained through interaction and participation. Ultimately this means unpaid labour in the conventional sense of monetary compensation, where the popular notion of ‘modding as a leisure activity’ and ‘modding as an extension of play’ permits exploitation. He goes on to say that in entertainment industries the relationship between work and play is changing to a hybrid form of ‘playbour’. This is exactly what I sought by engaging in this research at the outset, an exploration of a hunch I personally experienced in understanding my own modding activity as an extension of my gameplay.

Where I would argue that Kücklich goes astray is in postulating that the perception of modding as a form of play is an oppressive perpetuation in opposition to modders being compensated for their work. This position is in favor of extrinsically motivating modders with financial compensation. This has two problems. First, Kücklich is arguing for the commodification of modding, against Bruns's produsage points against industrial age notions of labour (Bruns, "Produsage" 3). Kücklich is naming this useful notion of playbour, but using it immediately to argue for commodification with mods situated as productions rather than a more nuanced and current understanding of community, interconnectedness, and produsage. Secondly, from my many years of experience in game design, I know that if you extrinsically motivate someone who is intrinsically motivated you will lessen their engagement and motivation. If someone is doing something because they love doing it, and you offer them a reward, they will do it worse, or less, or stop doing it. Internalising external motivators to near-intrinsic is one of their main goals of game design and gamification. With these issues in mind, positioning playbour as exploitation is problematic.

Kücklich also uses the game example of *Counterstrike* to tease out elements of work and labour, and the value of those productions. The shelf life, market testing, brand building, and customer engagement and loyalty, innovation, and community surrounding the game are all addressed. Yet, *Counterstrike* was a mod for the game Half-Life which was developed and published by Valve, the same company that created the host platform and design for monetization of *Skyrim* mods.

Using the lens of playbour in my research, I searched for the general elements of playbour in the content and discourse of the Q&A filtered posts of the *Reddit AMA*. I did

not focus on the false dichotomy of labour versus play as presented in Kücklich's 'precarious playbour' article. I instead focus more on terms like 'play' and 'labour. I hope to find posts with the computer assisted searches which contain discourse relating to playbour. I then assess what insight they might provide toward my research questions in the discourse when looking at it with playbour as a theory.

Key Theory: Assemblage of Play

Taylor's concept of assemblage of play is particularly relevant in helping to understand modding and modder culture with respect to ideas of play. Assemblage of play is about understanding the relationships between technology, game experience, and the game's social aspects. This is to inform understandings of play in a more robust or examinable way than previously leveraged understandings of gameplay such as narrative and ludologic, systems, artefacts, and cultures.

Without dredging up a new fault line, or trying to crudely glue together system, narrative, and player, might we find a framework to not only includes these parts but also makes way for others and their interrelations? (Taylor 336)

Assemblage of play describes a flow between systems, players, developers, cultures, and technologies. Applying this theory helps me to see if part of the conflict in mod monetization is because of factors attributable in part to the assemblage of play. Assemblage of play helps to reconcile user practices and player produced software modifications. The theory addresses mods quite directly, and in this way should be relevant in examining the *Reddit AMA* data with respect to ideas of play expressed in those posts.

Assemblage of play in Taylor's initial context is in reference to raid mods in *World of Warcraft*. In this case, Taylor is concerned with a relatively simple User Interface modification for raiding and examines the mod in the context of the players, the mod, and the game. In her example, she demonstrated the complex nuances made apparent by looking at the interconnection of the systems, player culture, and how the mod interacts with these forces. She characterises the mod as a "software actor" (Taylor 335) and talks about the mod as an agent/ nonhuman actor, because of the way the mod works. She goes on to address the practices around player culture with requiring this mod, and how the game has an affordance for mods to do more than adjust the way the game looks but actually alter how it plays. Mods which alter gameplay are central to the *Skyrim* mods debated in the *AMA*.

We can see a complex set of relationships between not only the player and their software, but the collective use of software and the production of group practices. (Taylor 336)

These group practices are part of why this theory is one of the lenses I am choosing for my research in understanding how modding is expressed in posts of the *Reddit.com AMA*. In my analysis I look for indications of assemblage of play, specifically indicators of the interplay between the systems, technology, and practices aspects. I then use this information with assemblage of play as a lens to understand the discourse in the data set and how it might inform my research questions.

The notion of assemblage is one way to help us understand the range of actors (system, technologies, player, body, community, company, legal structures, etc.), concepts, practices, and relations that make up the play moment. (Taylor 332)

I look at many of these elements presented by Taylor. Specifically, I consider systems, technology, and practices to help identify relevant discourse to validate and examine an expression of the assemblage of play in the context of modding. It is unclear whether any of this is expressed in the AMA data. I then assess evidence in the discourse of this theory in discourse it might provide some insight toward my research questions.

Research methods

Monetization of *Skyrim* by Valve and Bethesda was cancelled due to backlash by the mod community in 2015. My questions concern the cultural factors that led to this backlash. What factors of playbour, produsage, and assembly of play are expressed by the anti-monetization population of the modding community in this *AMA* data? What can these reactions tell us about the perception of modders on the nature of modding in the context of this monetization?

I have gathered and assessed materials from social media and online news from the period between April 23rd 2015 to April 28th 2015 which deal with this *Skyrim* Mod Monetization. For discourse analysis I only include a filtered subset of 157 Q&A user posts from the *Reddit.com AMA* with Gabe Newell on April 25, 2015 (*Reddit.com*, “Mods and Steam”). *Reddit* is the best source for this analysis because of the direct communication captured there in a rare exchange across cultural boundaries of power directly on the topic of mod monetization. The *Reddit.com AMA* text contains discourse from the community of modders as they respond to the mod monetization by addressing Newell directly. Of all of the materials gathered in looking at this topic, the *AMA* represents the best source data to address my research questions within the scope of this thesis.

This qualitative methodological approach combines a brief computer assisted content analysis with discourse analysis of the *Skyrim* mod monetization event unfolding through a *Reddit AMA*, further contextualised and informed by my experience as a participant in modding and game production. This self-reflection includes an account of

my engagement with the community during this event, the creation of my mods, and engagement with the community prior to the monetization event. This self-reflection and discourse analysis of the online discussion and posts are informed by existing game studies research. The discourse analysis is focused on a filtered subset of the *Reddit.com* AMA with Gabe Newell on April 25th 2015. Informed by theoretical underpinnings from game studies, I also reflect on my experience as both a professional game designer and longtime modder of Bethesda titles, including *Skryim*. These personal reflections are presented with disclosure of my point of enunciation and how my experience and identity necessarily affect my lenses in studying these communities and perspectives.

Ethics

Reddit has a privacy policy which informs every user that their posts are in the public domain. As a forum on *Reddit* and in the AMA context the posts here are quite visible and as Townsend puts it "...whether online postings are public or private are determined to some extent by the online setting itself..." (5). Users engaging with a high profile AMA on *Reddit* are well aware of the public and conspicuous nature of their posts. This publicly available *Reddit* maintains anonymity for some but not others. GabeNewellBellvue (Valve CEO) is not anonymous, as this is confirmed identity by *Reddit*, and relevant context as the 'original poster' of the AMA. This discourse analysis focuses on Newell as the central point of cultural power in this discussion. Not obfuscating his identity is an important element for my research because who he is contextualizes the data and is important for understanding the narrative. Other users are identified to me by their *Reddit* names as these are already the degree of anonymity users have chosen for themselves. On top of this, I have replaced these names with names of *Skryim* characters

to further anonymise the data in lieu of informed consent (Franzke et al. 10). There is little to no risk of harm in my research as these posts were public and the paid mods being discussed here no longer exist, so this is not an active controversy in this way anymore. The subject matter is not sensitive, does not involve research on children or vulnerable adults directly, and the research is not intended for mass publication. If I were to publish an article based on this research I would continue obfuscating all user names except for GabeNewellBellvue (Valve CEO). This is in accordance with the guidelines in the most recent *Internet Research: Ethical Guidelines 3.0*, published in 2020. (Franzke et al.).

Limitations

I have gathered material from the *Reddit AMA* procedurally using the *Reddit Q&A Filter*. This filter privileges the voice of the Original Poster (OP) Gabe Newell, and those responding to his posts.

Q&A Sort

We're trying out a new sort style for specific threads like AMAs - highlighting the most upvoted questions and answers in a thread. You may have seen a prototype version of this in the *AMA* app a few months ago - we're now looking to roll that out to the website." (*Reddit.com*, "[reddit change] Tweaks to Q&A sort")

This filter is used to bring more than 18,000 posts down to a reasonable scope for further filtering by computer assisted content analysis to produce a relevant data set for the discourse analysis. I chose this filter also because it also factors in upvotes. 'Upvotes' on *Reddit* are an indicator of which posts are more in agreement with the community segment participating in the *AMA*. It is also an indication of a vote of importance by users

in this *Reddit AMA*. Both of those are important when surveying this mass of data which is a mix of opinion, random comments, off-topic rants, and actual on-topic contributions representing relevant data in understanding the discourse present in the mod community at the time of the *AMA*. These posts are what the community votes for the most, and are therefore most representative of popular participant views, interests, and concerns. That these are also filtered with respect to the OP Gabe Newell, who is on-topic for the most part in the *AMA*, also helps to bring the more relevant texts into light.

However, there are limitations to this method. I read every one of the 18,400 posts in the *AMA*, and was also there while the *AMA* was happening. I know that there are many valuable, thoughtful, and insightful posts, many of which speak to my own perspective and opinions, which are removed from my dataset through this method. I chose this method as a means of being impartial at the outset. I ended up hand picking relevant posts from this subset during the computer assisted content analysis phase of my research, but starting with *Reddit's* own Q&A filter allows me to avoid outright bias of only hand picking posts which might support my own views. This is important as I explore the appearance of the theories of playbour, assemblage of play, and produsage in the text with respect to the topic as being relevant to the monetization event. This filter is a first step in ensuring impartial procedural filtering, as opposed to searching for relevant examples in the 18,400+ post data set, which would speak to my own predispositions on these topics.

This initial filtering also has the limitations of representing relevance as a popularity contest. The more popular the opinion the more upvotes it might receive and will appear higher in the results of the *Reddit* filter (*Reddit.com*, [reddit change] Tweaks to Q&A sort). There are political forces at play in this *AMA* in an attempt by the community to upwardly

sway the opinion of Gabe Newell and by extension exert some control over Valve, and *Steam*. That could result in some of the upvotes disproportionately boosting some of the more anti-monetization posts into my dataset. This is because the most motivated people interested in this *AMA* on this topic are displeased with the monetization. Newell is also asking those voices to speak in the title of the *AMA*, and the context of the *AMA* is a response to negative feedback. Those in the community who are indifferent or in agreement might add posts to the discussion, but would not be so aggressively upvoted as they are not motivated to effect change as aggressively as those who feel change is needed.

The theoretical frames I have chosen as lenses for the computer assisted content analysis sampling and discourse analysis also have limitations. They focus on my research questions and not on issues of commodification, the control Valve exerted in its approach to monetization by only telling certain members of the community that it was happening, among many other issues raised in the *AMA*. Many other researchers have explored these aspects and my shift away from these factors toward my chosen research questions and theoretical frames is in an effort to make a small but novel contribution to the growing body of research around user generated content, monetization, mods, and the cultures involved in those activities.

Why computer assisted content analysis?

The main reason for the inclusion of a computer assisted content analysis as part of my textual analysis is to reduce the scope for the discourse analysis, but also to focus on the more relevant data in the Q&A filtered *AMA* dataset. I am less focused on codifying

the text or looking for outcomes directly through computer assisted content analysis as I would employ for other research questions. In this case, to explore how modding is expressed in the dataset in the context of playbour, produsage and assemblage of play, I am using computer assisted content analysis as a manual filter. I will be indicating the search terms in the findings chapter.

Computer assisted content analysis in this case is used as a part of the sampling method. Sampling is the process of drawing representative data to undo the statistical biases inherent in any symbolic material, but more relevant to my research here is to ensure the conditionally selected posts are representative of the phenomena being studied (Krippendorff 406). Computer assisted content analysis allows me to do three things. First, it helps me to filter down to a dataset which is focused enough to then engage with more detailed discourse analysis. Secondly, it allows me to parse the data in the context of my research questions using each of my chosen theoretical frames in a broader way than discourse analysis can. By looking at the results of searches for key terms I can gauge relevance and also derive relevant meaning, such as the modder discourse patterns or the relevance of those search terms to the issue at hand. This reveals insights for further searches, things to look more closely for in the discourse analysis phase, and understanding of higher level trends with the cultural discourse around paid mods as a whole.

Contextual Content Analysis

Following each computer assisted search in the context of the three theories I am focusing on, I then performed a content analysis of each result of the search with my own

lens. This method helped to keep my known biases in check while allowing me to leverage the strengths of my knowledge and experience in modding, modder culture, and the game industry to accurately assess relevance, recognise signaling, underlying meaning, and ultimately find relevant posts in a consistent manner.

By using a combination of search terms, and my own assessment of the content of resultant posts I validate the results of the research; guarding against less rigorous alternatives such as randomly choosing posts, or choosing posts from all 18,400+ posts in the *Reddit AMA* which support my own opinion. However, even with this effort, validation of content analysis is potentially problematic. “Validation of content analysis results is limited by the intention of the technique to infer what cannot be observed directly and for which validating evidence is not readily available” (Krippendorff 406). I endeavor to be as impartial as possible while still using the advantage of my knowledge in this space to analyse relevant data. All of the described limitations, logic, and methodology are employed in an effort to validate the rigour of the sampling of the *AMA* posts and thus validate the dataset used for discourse analysis.

Why Discourse Analysis?

To understand the cultural elements at play in this case, looking at the voices of those involved is important. Having accounts from modders or key stakeholders is ideal for discovering more in terms of modder culture, or how modders perceive the process of modding. However, hindsight can be a problem for research seeking to uncover elements of a conflict. Conducting interviews now would not be free of the distortion of hindsight. By looking at the written discussions captured at the time, I can not only see sentiment and

trace some understandings for the community but also see the manipulation of the situation and the shifting awareness over the course of the period captured in the *Reddit.com AMA* with Gabe Newell on April 25, 2015. The goal here is to separate this discourse from what has been written since, as *Skyrim* mods are now successfully monetized by the Creator Club program with Zenimax, the company who owns Bethesda. Monetization is still controversial, but that *AMA*, that time and space, is an especially raw moment of backlash for the modding subculture as their community and practice were being appropriated without warning. The interaction happened online with an online community, so the impression of the exchange and tensions is captured in text. Present day interviews would have the distortion of hindsight, so in this case, the historical texts I examine here are more appropriate for assessing the discourse at play at the time.

I have used discourse analysis of the aforementioned material to reconstruct a series of events and assess them using my own experience, accounts, and application of the assemblage of play and other theories to help explain why these events unfolded as they did. I am looking for evidence in these events of causality to inform my research questions. As above, these questions are mainly around cultural appropriation through monetization, and the concept of modding as assemblage of play. I am also searching for evidence of understanding of modding as play and the perspectives of the community as a whole. The content analysis and filtering focus on key player and stakeholder Gabe Newell CEO of Valve, but the posts I select for discourse analysis are users responding to Newell in persuasive argumentation which contain elements from my theoretical frames. Applying game studies theories and existing research to this discourse analysis, I can then

shed new light on the monetization of *Skyrim* mods, modding as play, and why this particular event was so controversial and divisive.

Discourse Analysis

Discourse analysis is used to study larger structures across a series of sentences. It is different from linguistics in that it is used to study language in action and as a cultural practice rather than language as an abstract system (Johnstone 2). It looks at ideological structures which enable discursive choices, constraints, subjectivity, power and agency (Stygall; Gee). I use both critical discourse analysis and to a lesser extent rhetorical discourse analysis to analyse a set of posts to address my research questions. In citations of the AMA data here I retain the original text in its original state, including reproducing the poster's own grammar, spelling and other formatting or writing issues. Looking at the actual composition retains meta information which is part of the cultural expression. While analysis of these elements is beyond the scope of this thesis I recognise the importance of presenting the text as it was posted.

Rhetorical Discourse Analysis

As Jennifer Andrus writes, "Rhetorical discourse analysis (RDA) brings together methods and theories from strands of discourse analysis (DA), classical rhetoric, and rhetorical analysis" (1). As I analysed the posts selected through the filtering and sampling methods I have chosen, I also employed elements of critical and rhetorical discourse analysis. This is because of the persuasive nature of the dataset. The posts in this *AMA* were directed at Gabe Newell in an attempt to persuade him with various forms of argumentation. The use of free mods cultural rhetoric by the mod community is being

called forth by the structure and premise of the *AMA* itself. The *AMA* was scheduled as a way for the CEO of Valve to address the backlash that their paid mods program had caused online. The beginning of this forum reads, “On Thursday I was flying back from LA. When I landed, I had 3,500 new messages. Hmmm. Looks like we did something to piss off the Internet” (Reddit.com, “MODs and Steam”). With this as an opening stance, Kücklich’s concern about oppressive lack of compensation is suppressed, and instead modders unhappy with financial compensation for their mods are called to have their voices heard. The mod community is not being asked ‘what do you like best about our new paid mods program?’. This is a call for a particular voice to be called forth from the mod community, the rhetoric against paid mods, which is another reason why I chose this dataset to explore my chosen theoretical frames around the concepts of produsage, playbour, and the assemblage of play. Even when posts are in favor of financial compensation, they usually at least criticize Valve’s approach and call for reform.

Because of the persuasive nature of the *AMA* itself and an understanding of this bias in the *AMA*, I consider an element of rhetorical discourse analysis to be important in analysing the data with my chosen theoretical frames. As Jennifer Andrus says, “The relationship between DA and rhetoric is typically one of borrowing—pulling in a single theory and method, or a set of them, out of one field into the other to enhance the analysis in some way” (4). This is what I intend to do; to use this method as an enhancement to critical discourse analysis because of the context of the posts. Therefore, I must take rhetoric into consideration in analyzing the discourse here.

Critical Discourse Analysis

One of the founders of critical discourse analysis Norman Fairclough, describes it as “exploring the opaque relationships of causality and determination between (a) discursive practices, events and texts, and (b) wider social and cultural structures, relations and processes; to investigate how such practices, events and texts arise out of and are ideologically shaped by relations of power and struggles over power” (132). With critical discourse analysis I identify indicators, sometimes by leveraging meaning outside the text itself in order to identify signaling of power relations. Sometimes commenters are signaling as a sign of power, position, knowledge, or influence. Sometimes the poster signals broader ideas in a single word which come from gamer culture, rhetoric, history, or even referencing Newell himself in ways not obvious to readers not fully engaged with modding, *Skyrim*, and PC gaming. And sometimes these are one in the same, where signaling using a lesser known or otherwise privileged signal is in itself a signal of subcultural power.

These signaling indicators inform only part of a critical discourse analysis where I explore how the poster is being persuasive and analyze the meaning of the subtext in the context of the aforementioned theoretical frames. As these posts were brought out to examine or articulate why paid mods were not desired, they should be a good source of data for insight into why mods resist commodification. There must be some other factors at play here to differentiate this participatory productive activity or its resultant artefacts from other forms such as YouTube, streaming, remix, hacks, indie, and the many other forms of participatory production with games which have already negotiated commodification and in some cases appropriation. The analysis which follows sheds some

light on underlying factors which can inform emerging participatory production, even if produsage, playbour, and assemblage of play are not factors in the discourse of the mod community present in this *Reddit AMA* data.

About Gabe Newell

Gabe Newell is the wealthiest professional developer in gaming, with a net worth of over four billion USD (Gilbert). Newell is sometimes affectionately referred to as “The Gaben”, derived from his email address at his founded company Valve. The nickname signals his power in the PC gaming space to the subculture of PC games and modding. This appreciation is sometimes taken to extremes by a subcultural group in gamer culture who call themselves the PC Master Race. They hold “GabeN the Almighty” somewhat jokingly as a figurehead in their continued placement of console and mobile gamers beneath themselves as PC gamers, who are also modders whether they identify as PC master race or not. By choosing this filtering method I am cognisant of this very real cultural power structure, comical as it may sound. Newell is the CEO of Valve, Valve runs *Steam*, the platform which runs *Skyrim*, where the free and paid mods both were hosted along with community forums. This is the real power of controlling access. Valve does not control all access to games and mods, but other than Todd Howard at Bethesda who made *Skyrim*, Newell is by far the most recognisable and powerful individual involved with this controversy. Following his actions as OP of the *AMA*, the CEO of Valve, and a powerful thought leader in modding and gamer culture would make sense even if the Q&A filter did not exist. The *AMA* filter is made to “highlighting the most upvoted questions and answers in a thread” (*Reddit.com*, [reddit change] Tweaks to Q&A sort). The filter has also

been upgraded to have even better results and preserve Newell's content even if, as it was in this case, they were 'down voted' into obscurity.

After introducing Q&A sort, we've continued to iterate on it based on feedback from users. Today, we've shipped a change to increase the amount of community participation shown in Q&A sort, after testing it in the beta community for a few weeks.

See the code behind this change on GitHub.

There are also a few other minor changes to Q&A sort we previously mentioned in the live thread:

1. The "responder" of a thread will fall back to their default sort, rather than Q&A sort.
2. Also, their replies will always be shown, regardless of score, to help users find even highly downvoted answers.

Remember that you can always send us suggestions and bug reports via [r/IdeasForTheAdmins](#) and [r/bugs](#), respectively.

Happy redditing! (*Reddit.com*, "[reddit change] Tweaks to Q&A sort")

In my sampling I look at only level 1 and 2 posts as presented by this filter. This is a significantly smaller but still large dataset for discourse analysis of 157 posts. Level one of the filtered forum has 124 and Level two has 33. This in total makes 157 posts. Continuing past this filter on any given thread can yield some insight in places, but more often comments tend to degenerate. For example, discussion may turn towards personal issues or other topics like issues with other games, *Steam* itself, Valve as a company, etc. This is not likely to be data which sheds light on my research questions.

The OP Gabe Newell in this case is the best indicator of relevant discourse for this research because he is interested in the topic at hand, is already in the leadership of the

subculture, and is posting mostly around *Skyrim* Mod Monetization and not other issues. Further, this dynamic of speaking directly to Newell validates the data in a way other discussions around the topic cannot. Often fans will debate controversy in a context where no one has the power to take any major action. In the case of this *Reddit AMA* many posters are bringing their very best, and addressing someone usually not directly accessible who very much has the power to stop the thing they are upset about. This is why I chose to begin with the Q&A filter despite the drawbacks.

Modding cultural hierarchy

Newell is the 'original poster' (OP) and comments for the entire *AMA* with the Q&A filter in my dataset and has his voice in a power position by design. The power dynamic between modders and the platforms they use or games they are modding is economic and technical, but also based on larger power dynamics in game industry and gamer culture. While there are many PC games, only a few are moddable, and there are even fewer platforms with which to sell those games or distribute mods. The economy of modding is constituted of many contributors from the industry and modding community but very few platforms, be they games, distribution channels, or stores (Neiborg). In this way *Steam* presents as a monopoly even with the broad use of Nexus mods as a platform for the distribution of user created content. *Steam* distributes and supports the game itself along with mods. This puts *Steam* in a dominant position of power. Because of this Valve is very careful to manage public perceptions around the participation of modders and customers. To manipulate perceptions Valve will often appear to be acting collaboratively with players and modders, in order to obfuscate the systemic and very real power they hold with the control of the dominant PC games platform (Moody 36).

They own the primary network used by modders and gamers. With their digital distribution they also control access to the game itself, mods hosted on their system, and they can ban users, content, and games as they see fit. It is Valve's kingdom, and their king Gabe must maintain a discourse of democracy (Gillespie 359) in order to hold onto the player base which is increasingly threatened by other game distribution platforms. Julian Kücklich speaks to this industry point of view saying "While the industry is rich with financial capital, which is mostly used for the marketing of new products, the modding community itself commands huge social capital due to the tightly woven networks it has developed" (7). The industry, including a large distribution platform holder like *Steam*, is very aware and involved with this social power flow. It should come as no surprise then that they would look to all this activity and engagement as a source of revenue; that this monetization would be put forth on Valve's platform *Steam* and that Valve would be attacked because of it is not surprising either. The appropriation of mods as a commodity in this way had to happen eventually, as it fits too well with industrial age ideas of labour as needing to be compensated financially. Given that *Steam* is the dominant PC games platform, it was likely to happen on *Steam*, and Newell would have had to respond.

Research Findings

Context Awareness

I was there. On April 23, 2015 the computer games distributor Valve launched a payment method for Mods. When this happened I was already researching the relationship between play and mods. At the time I felt there was something important in the subculture which was not like other participatory communities, or elements which were apparent in other participatory fan creation groups, but were stronger and more raw in game modding. I was busy exploring my hypothesis around co-authorship and co-creation when the paid mods controversy happened. As a participant in the *Skyrim* mod scene, I was almost immediately aware of the controversy. I was also present during the AMA with Gabe Newell on *Reddit.com* on April 25th, 2015. I was quick to copy, download and otherwise snapshot sources online during those four days and refocus my research onto this monetization controversy as a case study. In the context of this case of mod monetization, I remain focused on play, participatory production, and the culture of modding as differentiated by some element of play. Both Postigo and Kücklich already effectively demonstrated that the value created with game mods is commodified as unpaid forms of unforced labor. Neiborg (134) shows how the ludic economy of mods and games is composed of many developers to relatively few platforms and the effect that has on the cultural power structures at play. Evidence of hacker culture, appropriation, labor, Marxism, and value perception are explored in works like *The Discourse of Digital Dispossession: Paid Modifications and Community Crisis on Steam* by Joseph (or *Modders: Changing the game through user-generated content and online communities* by

Moody. I am attempting to contribute to existing scholarship by looking at this event from the lens of play.

The *Reddit* Q&A filter

Parsing this *AMA* data as a whole would be an act of sorting through over 18.4k posts of mixed relevance. *Reddit.com* has coded a very useful parsing algorithm specifically invented for dealing with the data generated by this type of *Ask Me Anything (AMA)* thread. The Q&A filter shows posts where the Original Poster (OP), in this case Gabe Newell, is replying or posting in the thread. This approach has pros and cons. Notably, it privileges the OP. For my research this is desirable because of the context of the discourse, the rhetoric being explored, and Gabe Newell being one of the most privileged and powerful voices in the subculture. As described in the previous chapter, I used the most recent version of this filter which results in 157 posts.

Computer Assisted Qualitative Content Analysis

Here I use content analysis as a sampling tool with codifications based on my theoretical frames to filter the data set down enough to perform an effective discourse analysis. I use the three theoretical frames to derive search terms. The computer assisted content analysis allows me to more impartially scan for posts which contain the search terms. From that subset I leverage my own insight and understanding of the discourse to find posts which address topics relevant to my research questions. I then select posts that demonstrate relevance to playbour, assemblage of play, and produsage for further critical discourse analysis. The resulting posts are available in the appendix of this document

containing the complete and unedited text of each post which was selected for further analysis based on relevance to the research questions and content relating to the theoretical frame with which it was discovered.

Sampling Playbour (Kücklich)

Kücklich defines this as a hybrid form of play and labour, free labour that fits neither traditional definitions of work nor the categories of play or leisure. To explore how the concept of playbour might help me interpret this case of mod monetization, I searched for the following terms.

I began with the term “**Play**” which had 66 results. Most of these are not relevant. Because this is a forum about games, play comes up in many ways and as we know can be understood in many ways (Egenfeldt-Nielsen et al). This search term also returns the word “player” for many of the results.

The term “**Playing**” yielded 10 results. Playing has several relevant results. One result from user *Dibella* is focused on the issue of compensation, as it relates to play and other leisure activity where they say:

People keep saying "modders deserve to be compensated for their hard work" and if you feel that way, nexus has or is implementing a donation system. Use it. But no, I disagree that they deserve *payment*. Just because you work hard on something doesn't mean you necessarily deserve a paycheck for doing it. People do lots of things that require a *hell* of a lot of time and effort, such as leading gaming communities, running guilds, hell, even playing some games can be hard work to be the best. That doesn't mean everybody should be paid for it. The mod community was beautiful because of what it was and throwing money into the situation does nothing to make it better (Appendix A 2)

Dibella's comment addresses the issues around monetization, compensation, the concept of labour, ideas integral to playbour.

Searching for “**Labour**” returned 0 results, and turned out to be a fruitless search term, resulting in terse complaints rather than coherent arguments. Also, the term labour has alternative spellings in other countries making it problematic. The absence of results here did not indicate to me that this concept was absent from the text, so I began searching for synonyms.

The term “**Work**” gave 236 results, including “workshop”, “worked”, “working”. Comments were often not directly related to the concept of labour, but rather the notion of ‘functioning’ in various contexts. That is, either the technical functionality of tech, or the functionality or even effectiveness of the paid mods program. There were many postings about legalities and ownership, most professing some opinion on if modders should be compensated for work, or conversely that compensating modders ruins modding, usually without any further discussion or reasoning apparent. These posts were interesting to parse overall. Some do address concepts of playbour in their sentiment and the underlying discourse of their points.

The comments of one poster, *Akatosh*, warrant discourse analysis because they speak of effort, value, the practice and the culture of modding. Another post of interest comes from *Arkay* who identifies as a professional, expresses an analytical perspective, and openly identifies as being a modder/ gamer: “...but we have a culture. the fact is, steam is more than a marketplace..” (Appendix A 3).

That there are so many results for the word 'work' is indicative of the word's relevance to perceptions of monetization and compensation value, also outlined in Bruns's concept of produsage.

Sampling Produsage (Bruns)

The next theoretical frame I searched for in my Q&A filtered data set from the *Reddit AMA* is Bruns's framework for user-led content creation called produsage, which he created to reconcile the systemic problems associated with translating industrial ideas of content creation with social software. This frame has a lot to do with labour or playbour, and is focussed on concepts of social capital, intrinsic motivation, participatory production of user generated and distributed media content, of which game mods are some small part.

To explore Produsage I started with content analysis attempting to find key terms which might address Bruns's concept of produsage present in the filtered *AMA* data, filtering with a content search for as I did for playbour. Searching for "**Produce**" found in 6 results. Two of those results align with the criteria of my methods as addressing my research questions.

I think the other argument is valid as well. It is one thing to take spare time to produce free content for a game that you really enjoy and share that with the community. When you introduce 'the market' and money in to the situation I like many others feel somethings is lost and generally leads to a drop in quality and community from that point forward if the transition isn't managed, understood and curated well from the start. (Appendix A 4)

Julianos is speaking to concepts which tie in with produsage most directly. Other results varied in relevance from trolling, to other valid but ordinary points about appropriation,

value perception, and business practices. *Julianos* is calling into question value and production, which are important for understanding mod culture's reaction to paid mods in the context of produsage. I further analyze these posts in the discourse analysis.

The term "**Production**" had 0 results, which is unfortunate. This shows that the mod community present in this dataset do not characterize the work of modding as production. This may indicate a disconnect between modding as labour and modding as entertainment or play. The terms 'work' and 'creation' present here may not be connected to conventionally monetized outcomes and therefore may not be characterized here as production. Production connotes passionless work in a passionate community such as modders, of generating product regardless of the reason or motivation.

Searching "**Creation**" gave me 11 results, one of which is a thoughtful post by user *Mara*. They presented six points addressing many factors and while it is not all tightly related to produsage, it does name some of the cultural elements at play in the discourse.

Sampling Assemblage of play (Taylor)

The assemblage of play leverages the existing framework of assemblage from science and technology studies to explore the relationships of sociality, game experience, and technology together as the assemblage of gameplay. In the context of mods, monetization, and understanding the cultural discourse here, Taylor's concept is about understanding modding as play through its parts, the social, the tech, and the game itself. To explore how the concept of assemblage of play might help me interpret this case of mod monetization I searched for the following terms:

The term **“Play”** again gave 66 results in this context. However, in this context most of these are less relevant. This search term was perhaps too direct an approach for finding material for understanding the relevance of the assemblage of play.

The more focussed term **“Playing”** returned 10 results again. ‘Playing’ has several irrelevant results, including again the post by *Dibella*, but one user in particular *Stendarr* does speak to concepts relevant to the assemblage of play.

I met a friend playing some HL [*Half-Life*] mod some late night, and he had a server. He loaded up a map he made and explained how I could do the same. That moment changed my life. Although when I finally installed WorldCraft from the HL CD [*Half-Life* Compact Disc] I hadn't quite wrapped my head around orthogonal geometry yet (I was around 9-10 years old, Lol).

All I could make was huge, flat rectangular blocks. No concept of leaks, skyboxes, etc. Now i'm 25 and i've been building levels for every single game that has an available level editor for over HALF of my life. (Appendix A 5)

This anecdote expresses all three parts of the assemblage of play; the social, the technology, and the game.

The term **“Social”** found 4 results. Two of these are quite interesting and robust responses from users *Talos* and *Kynareth*. Both speak to the sharing of the community using the terms social capital and socialism. “I never wanted capitalism in my socialist modding community.” (Appendix A, 5)

“Creation” is a search term I used to seek out the posts which spoke to more technological elements of the debate. This is because modders talking about *Bethesda's Creation Kit* would be referencing the modding tool, and thus the technology which would

be the main part of the assemblage of play, if present at all. This term returned 11 results, of which one was very technical from user *Zenithar*.

Mod creation for Skryim is an interconnected spiderweb of dependancies. This pay for mod workshop has just splintered that network of interconnected mods that require each other to work. (Appendix A 9)

The above-mentioned posts are found from these search terms, informed by my theoretical frames, and form my dataset for subsequent discourse analysis. The discourse analysis focuses on cultural and sentiment discourse. I use these posts to find evidence that addresses my research questions exploring how modding is expressed by this particular group of modders, as evidenced in this *AMA*, and how the concepts of produsage, assemblage of play, and playbour could help us interpret this case and the reactions of modder subculture to this monetisation. I then discuss patterns revealed through the discourse analysis and contextualize these with my own involvement in the game industry and in *Skyrim* modding.

Research Analysis

In this chapter I apply the theoretical frames of produsage, playbour, and assemblage of play in light of my main data source, the Gabe Newell *Reddit AMA*. I also draw on cultural studies to parse this data using rhetorical discourse analysis. I then compare these newly refined findings and arguments against my original research questions around the cultural expression of modders. By doing so, I aim to shed new light on how modders respond to the commodification of mods, and how they express the exercise of modding as a form of gameplay.

With my chosen methodologies I was looking for patterns indicating a communal expression of modding as an extension of the gameplay of the game itself, and less a separate activity of production. Existing scholarly work describing separations between participatory production of media and play or leisure production lack this lens. The *AMA* data may not use the terms ‘playbour’ or ‘assemblage of play’ directly, but by analysing the rhetoric used by those who participated in the forum, Bruns and Taylor’s general ideas are still apparent through a closer analysis of the forum text. Ultimately my analysis questions if what modders thought they were divided about, what the media reported on, and how Valve reacted, were in many ways misunderstandings of two under-researched elements: **appropriation of collaborative play** and **modding as creative process**. My inquiry into the *appropriation of collaborative play* adds new detail to existing discourse, where research into the appropriation of ‘modder culture’ sometimes neglects *play* as an element which is critical to the encapsulating identity of ‘gamer’.

Secondly, and perhaps most importantly, I will examine **modding as a creative process**. In a process perhaps synonymous with the assemblage of play (Taylor), I question how modding can be understood as a game in itself, and an extension of gameplay. As I have previously indicated, I was present as a modder with my own releases on Nexus Mods at the time, and as an employee in the game industry during the time of this cultural crisis. I was also present during the *Reddit AMA*, in real time on April 25th 2015. This curiosity about the gamelike nature of modding comes from my position as a participant observer, fully embedded into the context of this case study material as it transpired. The questions of **how modding is expressed by this particular group of modders, as evidenced in this *Reddit.com AMA* and how my chosen theoretical frameworks might help us interpret this case and the reactions of modder subculture to this monetisation**, are rooted in my perspective as a modder and game design professional.

The perspective that I had found myself in is admittedly an invested one; however, I have triangulated my lived experience with the subsequently outlined discourse analysis and through the previously outlined literature review of mods and participatory culture. The inclusion of my positioned experience means that I see this data in ways other researchers have not. By seeing things differently and exploring my own perspective with critical analysis of the forum data, I hope to contribute new insight to the existing body of research covering mods and modder culture. In the following data analysis, I will parse the forum discourse with my theoretical frames. I have chosen to do this instead of focusing on more obvious appropriation elements, monetization generalities, or commodification in general, as the scholars I have mentioned have already written volumes on these concepts. I will

instead primarily seek evidence of more play based elements in accordance with the theories I have used to codify the dataset in Appendix A.

Playbour

Playbour is a confluence of the concepts of play and labour, and is a critical theory directly applied to mods by Kücklich. This is a most promising lens in this discourse analysis.

In the content analysis and sampling of posts through terms exploring playbour I found a post by user *Akatosh* as mentioned in my content analysis. *Akatosh* begins by addressing Gabe Newell, and telling him not to 'take mods away'. They then go on to mention something quite relevant in terms of playbour and produsage:

Gamers like myself understand the "ground rules" of mods... They may not always work, they may be abandoned, they may be limited in scope and unsupported. However, they have never had a cost. Now, Valve comes in and sees fit to change a system that has worked fine for years, and on top of that is taking a 75% cut. I don't see how you guys think this is okay. (Appendix A 2)

The concept of 'ground rules' mentioned here speaks to a fundamental accord in the modding community. Mods have always come with this provision -that the mod may break the game, as it is amateur fan production. This understanding permits mods far more flaws than the base retail game. This 'roughness' leads to a difference in expectations and the standards to which mods and modders are held. A commercial game would be ridiculed for graphical flaws, crashes, and other elements common to even the richest mods. Exoneration of mods and modders is a distortion which is normal in PC gamer and modder culture as an amplification of the perceived value and quality of mods. Kücklich addresses

this factor in an argument for the precarious nature of modding: “The precarious status of modding as a form of unpaid labour is veiled by the perception of modding as a leisure activity, or simply as an extension of play” (Kücklich 2). When the user of a mod product understands that it is a product of leisure - or at least voluntary, unpaid labour - it allows for understanding when quality, support, and scope are lacking. *Akatosh* supports this concept with their mention of how paying for a mod “cheapens the passion of modders” and “adds cynicism” toward mods when mods are held to standards of paid content. *Akatosh* is expressing modding as a source of value to PC gamers. Their comment raises this free labour issue, and argues that mods are “... a core part of the PC gaming experience...” which relies on an understanding of what can be expected of fan created work. They are calling into question the perceived lack of consideration by Valve in the change in expectations of mods when they become commodified.

User *Arkay* echoes some of *Akatosh*'s points on expectations, but emphasises the cultural implications. They present themselves as a professional instead of a gamer as *Akatosh* did. They say that from their corporate perspective, everyone has a right to financial compensation for production.

the fact is, steam is more than a marketplace, games are more than just the wooden dolls and board games they used to be, and mods are more than just a spin on a classic. there is a culture that surrounds them, there are expectations. they can be hobbies, proof of concepts, resumes. people have been rewarded for their work with fame and jobs. i think a donation button is the best of all of that. everybody involved deserves fair compensation for the work that they've done, but i don't think the culture that surrounds mods now should be monetized like valve just did it. (Appendix A 3)

They are saying that modding is not just production of the mod, it is about the culture. They are flipping the idea of user expectations the other way, toward the labour of playbour

and the essential social, shared, and negotiated elements of play which support mod production. *Arkay* also cites other rewards for modding including fame and jobs, saying that mods can be a resume, proof of concept, or just a hobby. This is also a part of playbour that Kucklitch says is a weakness of mods as opposed to other forms of free software development where mods are seen as play: "Modding, on the other hand, still has to struggle to free itself from the negative connotations of play: idleness, non-productiveness and escapism" (Kücklich, 7). The perception of modding as play being oppressive is not being echoed directly by *Arkay*. There is a reflection of a reward when *Arkay* mentions compensation and the perceived work of modding as leisure activity. This is aligned with Kücklich's playbour subtext. However, none of this informs whether or not the activity is or is not leisurely or a form of play, but only articulates perceptions of problems and incompatibility with paid mods.

Dibella, my last selected poster from the content analysis of playbour as a codification speaks to the concept of fun in modding, which is sometimes associated with play. They also speak to other cultural factors broaching issues addressing produsage. *Dibella* does not identify themselves as a modder, gamer, or professional directly but alludes to a long term engagement with the modding community. *Dibella* lists a number of problems they see with the monetization of *Skyrim* mods. Among these are the reliance of the game industry on modders to fix the games with mods as exploitative free labour, leading to an incentive for less effort on the part of PC game developers. Appropriation and commodification are also mentioned in various negative framings and echo *Akatosh* and *Arkay*'s problems with expectations and value perception.

From the emotional perspective... the modding scene was really cool. It was beautiful to see people doing something for fun to make a game they loved better, and cooperating with others for the sake of enjoyment. Many mods relied on other mods and were packed together showing this big collaborative effort, and over night all those people have turned on each other due to some cashing in, others protesting those cashing in by removing their mods from those modpacks and refusing for them to be used, it's all toxic. Overnight. Yeah, people didn't always get along, but this is ridiculous. (Appendix A 3)

Dibella is arguing people mod for fun, which Kücklich as previously discussed addresses as a problematic perception of modding. In saying the modding scene was 'cool', *Dibella* is defending the notion of collaboration. They go on to talk about how the commodification of mods through monetisation is destroying the collaborative expectations or cultural norms of the modding community. In practice this also has a direct impact on mod development costs in terms of time and feasibility. Modders rely on each other as a collaborative resource in development but as *Dibella* points out, mods themselves also rely on each other. For example, many mods will require another user created mod to work.

The rhetoric in these posts is consistently around expectations of the quality, modder cultural norms, and expectations around commercial games and paid products. They present arguments against the incompatible difference in user expectations between paid games content versus free mods. The logic of these three posts, and all of the posts discovered in the content analysis, lead to the suggestion of a donation option, or cancelling the paid mods program entirely. While persuading Newell with this anti-compensation rhetoric, these users exposed elements of playbour in the forms of the perception of modding as fun, idleness, and the contribution of mods to the game industry and game value, but do not call for compensation the way Kücklich does when they call

modding unwaged and exploited (8). The lens of playbour contrasted with this dataset shows evidence of some elements of play or playbour in these posts. There is evidence of the mod community perceiving their work as playbour, perhaps even as exploitative, but they still reject the monetization Valve introduced (and Kücklich vouched). Users might see some of the exploitative perceptions of mods as leisure, but they also value the mods as leisure and as a collaborative practice.

Prodsusage

In the content analysis and sampling phase using the lens of prodsusage, only two posts met the criteria of being relevant to the topic or were most representative of the posts revealed in the content analysis and contained content for further analysis. Prodsusage is a theory from Bruns around the convergence of users and producers, and this convergence's related activities. It calls into question concepts and cultural norms around production, value, and consumers in light of user creation and participatory production. Prodsusage as Bruns describes it, has many characteristics and limitations which make it a complex theory to apply to these lengthy posts. The posts contain discourse relevant to my research questions and inform the other frames I am using as codification to focus this analysis. However, these posts were selected for containing relevant keywords, and those parts of the posts will be the focus of this analysis beginning with *Reddit.com* user *Julianos*.

Julianos focuses on value and the disparity in approaches to design and production between paid content and free mods, with a reference to the negative impact this decision will have on the community. They go on to criticise the monetization approach

as 'nickel and diming' users for content, and criticising mods as being of poor quality generally in the same breath. This is a much more extreme tone than the posts I found under playbour.

It is one thing to take spare time to produce free content for a game that you really enjoy and share that with the community. When you introduce 'the market' and money in to the situation I like many others feel something is lost and generally leads to a drop in quality and community from that point forward if the transition isn't managed, understood and curated well from the start. (Appendix A 5)

In the segment above *Julianos* is addressing the concepts of produsage and playbour as part of their persuasive argument. *Julianos* is speaking to the idea of modding as an activity of leisure, as Kücklich describes, but is also addressing produsage in the way they assert a disconnect between mod production and financial compensation. This post indirectly addresses concepts of collaboration, the unfinished nature of mods, and the permissive nature of an uncurated delivery platform. *Julianos* is proposing that these affordances are desired, and are now threatened. Their mention of 'the market' is meant in this context to invoke ideas of a modder designing mods no longer for the betterment of the game experience, or to add value in the ways mods currently do, but rather to be designed in ways that present well, have demand, and will sell well. This is a point touched on by others in my dataset as an accepted discourse in the community that market driven design is worse in terms of overall quality of the resulting product for a user, than community driven design for mods. This echoes concepts that Bruns also highlights in his theory of produsage ("Produsage" 5).

Bruns describes ways in which companies can leverage produsage as commercial activity. One way that I highlighted earlier in detail is 'hijacking the hive'. Hijacking has

elements of harbouring, where the commercial interest provides value-added services into the community, and harvesting, by provisioning value-added services directly with the artefacts produced by the produsage community. In this post *Julianos* is identifying the modders and mods as having been hijacked by Valve in both the harbouring of mods on the *Steam* platform and the harvesting of mods themselves with this monetization. They are taking far greater exception to harvesting, which contributes to hijacking, than they do to harbouring. This is consistent with other PC based participatory software production like online host *Source Forge* being a favourite host for open source software projects (Bruns, "Produsage" 5). Perhaps there was a way for Valve's *Steam* platform and Bethesda, the developer of *Skyrim*, to better leverage harbouring as Bruns describes it, rather than engaging in harvesting and hijacking.

The other post I analysed through the lens of produsage is by user *Mara* who begins addressing Newell with "I love Valve". This is a persuasive approach often seen in this *AMA* in order to show support and understanding to the OP, a giant in the community, and the one who is in a position to either alter the paid mods program or close it as CEO of Valve. Appealing to him with adoration is indicative of the power structures in PC gaming where modders supercede players in most contexts, but developers (while regularly attacked) have real power above gamers and hobbyist modders as the source of the material on which the culture is based. *Mara* echoes *Julianos* and elements of characterizing monetization as appropriation in accordance with the elements of 'hijacking the hive' described by Bruns. Their post addresses six arguments for why the paid mods program is 'unintentionally' destructive. In making these arguments the post outlines

elements of hijacking the hive, as well as important elements of produsage. One of *Mara's* points is the interdependence and interoperability of *Skyrim* mods.

Mods are not official DLC [Paid Downloadable Content], nor are they available after a QC [Quality Control] from Valve. They are just straight up available if it isn't something ridiculous (sexually suggestive or whatnot). However, they might break/do something to your save on their own (yes, even armor mods), bring instability which may not be an easy find at first, and more importantly they can interact in other mods in incompatible ways. This is something that is simply unavoidable due to how the esp system in *Skyrim* works. A lighting mod can conflict with a follower mod for instance. Mod authors then get angry customers who claim that their mods don't work and there could literally be 1 billion reasons as to why that is so. I can guarantee that anyone who uses steam workshop for *Skyrim* modding has next to 0 clue on how to spot these errors on their own, because the way how the workshop auto-updates subscribed mods for instance just shows the lack of user-control and is just plain terrible. (Appendix A 5)

Again we see the discourse around separating expectations of traditionally paid content from the expectations placed on fan made mods. We also see the quality of paid mods contextualized as being of questionable value and not to be trusted. *Mara* discusses mod compatibility and signals their insider knowledge as a modder/expert user by utilizing the file format 'esp'. Elder Scrolls Package (ESP) files are the uncompiled scripts which allow *Skyrim* to be modified. They can be merged, and stacked, and loaded in certain orders at runtime to alter many aspects of the game. This file interoperability reflects produsage in its fluid movement between roles, distributed generation of content, evolutionary iterative products, and permissions which allow for collaboration. That is to say that the structure of mods themselves are enabled and enforced by all four of the key characteristics of produsage outlined by Bruns ("Produsage" 3). This post is an example of a knowledgeable member of the community using produsage as a recurring argument against the appropriation and commodification of mods.

Mara goes on to warn that this interoperability will cause the paid mods not to work. Because of commercial competition modders will no longer collaborate, resulting in a loss of the permissive sharing that comes with produsage. The ESP format will simply not support functional paid mods. *Mara* mentions how much it would cost to run many existing mods, and how many mod authors are pulling down their mods, causing a cascade failure for mods which rely on elements of those pulled down. This highlights the interdependence, collaboration, and fluid engagement capacity of produsage. The rhetoric here with *Mara* and with *Julianos* is around produsage being stable, and hijacking being a destructive force to the point of being technically incompatible with the *Skyrim* mods. There is a cultural subtext here of destroying the sense of sharing and good will; that the mod community was peaceful, and Valve has brought infighting and destruction to the community. As *Mara* puts it: “Instead of an influx of brilliant works because of \$\$\$, people will start keeping sh*t to themselves and creative progression will mature at a snail's pace” (Appendix A 5). Their comment is calling out the thinly veiled altruism of Valve's rhetoric against the voice of modder culture, where compensation is positioned as a gift to modders from Valve and Bethesda. As discussed in my previous theoretical frame ‘Playbour,’ I see these rhetorical elements echoed repeatedly in the posts discovered in my dataset.

Assemblage of Play

With the lens of TL Taylor's assemblage of play I performed a sampling content analysis using relevant keywords. *Playing*, *social*, and *creation* were used to seek out elements of the player and play, the technologies, and the social elements Taylor highlights as an interrelation which forms the assemblage of play (336).

Stendarr's post speaks to more elements of the assemblage of play, cultural power flows, and macro rhetoric in this paid mods controversy as it relates to modder culture and modding as play. *Stendarr* starts off by signaling their age and experience with a mention of *Doom95*, which is one of the games often cited as popularizing mods or even the first example of what we now consider modding (Kücklich 4). *Stendarr* goes on to chronolog their discovery of modding in the context of Valve's own games and mods-based products. This post only briefly criticises the paid mods program.

This is a pathetic excuse for gaming when you've grown up with the experience I have. This is not the way I want PC GAMING TO GO! I am not against modders possibly earning some cash for their work but a paywall is most certainly NOT the way for pc gaming! (Appendix A 6)

Instead, this poster is taking a different approach with an empathetic narrative. They compare the way they play with console games and how this play differs from PC. In the context of paid mods and as argumentation against commodification, this is essentially a contrast highlighting the assemblage of play.

I met a friend playing some HL [*Half-Life* a game by Valve] mod some late night, and he had a server. He loaded up a map he made and explained how I could do the same. That moment changed my life. Although when I finally installed WorldCraft from the HL CD I hadn't quite wrapped my head around orthogonal geometry yet (I was around 9-10 years old, Lol). (Appendix A 7)

Social technology and play intersecting and interacting as elements in this user's experience is a phenomenon certainly aligned with what Taylor describes as assemblage of play. What makes that particular example so interesting is that it is echoing my own experience quite closely. *Stendarr* is referencing modding as being in the assemblage of play as both a singular event and in framing their future PC game engagement going

forward. *Stendarr* goes on to validate my close reading saying: “All I could make was huge, flat rectangular blocks. No concept of leaks, skyboxes, etc. Now i’m 25 and i’ve been building levels for every single game that has an available level editor for over HALF of my life.” (Appendix A, 7). This is certainly evidence that players are expressing some sense of the assemblage of play with relation to modding. This modder is expressing a love for the process of modding and its interplay with the gaming experience more than an affinity for the mod artefacts themselves; for them, mods are valued both in terms of social capital and financial value. This resonates with my lived experience that modding is about the journey rather than the outcomes. The discourse of this post is certainly not representative of most of the posts in this controversial *AMA*. This user is an outlier, but their unique articulation of a more emotional layer in an empathetic mode, exposes the less measurable and tangible interplay of elements rather than the items usually raised in the paid mods debate.

For the social elements of assemblage of play I analysed two posts. Both of them speak with similar tones of anger and dismissal, using phrases like ‘it is clear’ and rhetorical questions about the repercussions of Valve’s monetization. User *Kynareth* does not address the social aspect of assemblage of play in the discourse as directly as I had initially thought. They speak in the context of compensation and of mods as product, much more in line with the lens of produsage, or the issues produsage is meant to elucidate. There is one element of this post which does address my larger research questions, which is the idea of social motivations for modding versus financial. *Kynareth* uses the comparison of a daycare that began charging for late pickups by parents to argue against mod monetization. In their example, the result was that parents were now picking up their

children even later, and willingly paying the charge for additional childcare. They no longer felt guilt or empathy around their lateness, because of the added financial expense.

Costs and rewards can take many forms, not just financial forms, and when you push one specific "currency type" (pride/guilt, money and social capital can all fit into this concept) as a means to acquire a service or product, you push out the others, sometimes for a long time. (Appendix A 8)

This is an interesting metaphor that reveals an awareness of this trade-off of motivation and compensation by members of the mod community. *Kynareth* goes on to apply the daycare example to mods: "By opening monetization of mods you're going to push away modders who made things for their personal pride and/or social capital, and you'll bring in those who make things solely for money" (Appendix A, 8). *Kynareth* is arguing both about what incentivizes modders, and extrapolating that modders who will work for money will produce lower quality mods. This is in direct opposition to Newell's statement which *Kynareth* cites:

"Skyrim is a great example of a game that has benefited enormously from the MODs. The option for paid MODs is supposed to increase the investment in quality modding, not hurt it."-Gabe Can we talk about this a bit more? Because this seems to be the root of the problem. I think you were ill-advised on the economic impacts of monetization of something that was once free. I fear Varoufakis' departure has left a hole in Valve's understanding of human behaviour and economics. (Appendix A 8)

This discourse presented by *Kynareth* is the same in many ways as *Talos*, my second selected poster. They say that "these are not mods anymore, these are company-sponsored third party downloadable content without warranty, guarantee and quality control" (Appendix A 9). Their argument is not around the social aspect in the assemblage of play, but more in the vein of social capital or social value versus financial value. *Talos*

identifies as a modder and argues that they do not want to be compensated for modding. In fact, they say that if they will be compensated, then they will leave this modding community and find other communities where they will not be financially compensated. “I have a job to pay my bills, I make content for games because I enjoy doing it, and I want other people to enjoy it too” (Appendix A 9). *Talos* goes on to say “having the option of paid mods makes me never want to release mods ever again for enabled workshops, even free” (Appendix A 9). This modder is expressing a rejection of compensation because they feel they do what they do out of passion for the work itself, and for the accompanying community interactions. These are elements of intrinsic value as opposed to extrinsic motivations like money and power. As a game designer I could expand well on these aspects. However, considering modding in its relation to assemblage of play, this comment is an indicator of separating modding from the act of user creation/ the production of user content, and more into the realm of doing something because you enjoy it, which is more akin to play.

The posts I took for ‘social’ turned out to speak to play, and the post I took for ‘Play’ ended up addressing more social elements. This is not a detractor but a reinforcement of the concept of assemblage of play being represented and relative in this *Reddit AMA* and modder culture discourse. Taylor says:

Thinking about games as assemblage, wherein many varying actors and unfolding processes make up the site and action, allows us to get into the nooks where fascinating work occurs; the flows between system and player, between emergent play and developer revisions, between practices and player produced software modifications, between local (guild) communities and broader (server) cultures, between legal codes, designer intentions, and everyday use practices, between contested forms of play, between expectation and contextualization. (Taylor 332)

In other words, it is not the social or technical or play alone which explains what modders feel about mods, or even what part of these examples explain the cultural backlash. It is the assemblage or the co-mingling of these elements. Therefore, I see this outcome as a newly insightful (albeit unexpected) light to shed on the discourse of these posts. Looking deeply at the discourse as a whole, posters seem to be mixing the elements of the assemblage of play and addressing the space between the elements as frustration with paid mods.

My final post for discourse analysis with the lens of assemblage of play is user *Zenithar's* comments on the technical aspects of modding *Skyrim*. *Zenithar* characterizes modding *Skyrim* as interconnected and interdependent. I have detailed this already in chapters one and two, and will instead focus here on how *Zenithar* is presenting the technicalities of modding as persuasive argumentation with respect to the technological aspects of assemblage of play. *Zenithar* describes the normal process for a mod user to install a mod properly for *Skyrim*.

Any mod that is not a retexture or new item has dependencies on more than the official tool set. They may require the use of a script extender like SKSE. They may require the installation of the unofficial patches that address the bugs left over or introduced from official patches and DLC. They will probably have dependencies on mods that provide frameworks to enable to quests, behaviors, monsters, NPC, events, and locations. So your one mod will require SKSE, FNIS, Fuz Ro D-oh - Silent Voice, SkyUI, MCM, each required mod may have it's own required mods.

Then you will need a mod manager to ensure the proper load order of the .esp and .esm files. The Frakenbyro engine will load mods before official DLC, resulting in CTD on startup. Once the mod load order is correct you may need to fire up TES5Edit to make sure the mods are "clean" and to spot conflicts that will result in a crash to desktop. (Appendix A 10)

This process of downloading dependencies, loading them in the right order, cleaning mods, reordering, and trial and error might not seem like fun, but it does seem like play. Play is sometimes more about the struggle than anything else, where the goals or rewards have more value the more you had to struggle to achieve them. A mod user might start out downloading one mod they might be particularly interested in, enough to overcome the learning curve of applying the mod technologies required to apply a mod to a game. Before long they might easily have over a hundred interdependent mods stacked and merged with diminishing returns on the quality and stability of the game they are modding. I have often sat down to 'play' *Skyrim* only to spend hours installing new versions of mods, resolving the unexpected compatibility issues they caused, and striving for that never complete aspirational goal of creating some mod cocktail I would deem the ultimate *Skyrim* version. These are fundamental elements of engagement used in the game itself. This interrelation between the technical issues and affordances of *Skyrim* modding and game-like structures of interaction, challenge, natural escalation of risk vs. reward, and the social elements that arises in the community through this common struggle, resemble the elements listed by Taylor describing the assemblage of play.

The notion of assemblage is one way to help us understand the range of actors (system, technologies, player, body, community, company, legal structures, etc.), concepts, practices, and relations that make up the play moment. (Taylor 332)

In terms of assemblage, and according to the account of *Zenithar*, modding *Skyrim* is a play moment. Perhaps that is why *Zenithar* goes on to use this as a criticism of Valve's paid mods program. However, there is another insight beyond this that *Zenithar* broaches directly, which is that these interdependencies are supported by co-operation of mod authors, by a community which needs to work together and share information. If the people

behind the mods are not compatible, the mods they produce may not function, because they too are interdependent.

This pay for mod workshop has just splintered that network of interconnected mods that require each other to work. While paying for mods might not be bad in itself, this was the wrong game with the wrong engine to run this test with. (Appendix A 10)

While it is true that other games which support mods do not have the same affordance for combining mods that *Skyrim* does, there is usually some remixing by the mod users, especially for larger mods or total conversions. *Skyrim* was perhaps the least viable PC game with which to pilot the commodification of modding because of the technical, social and play elements of modding. Modders need each other, the communal passion to enhance the game, and the interdependent technologies which enable an interconnected system. Contextualized in terms of TL Taylor's theory, this might be comparable to an assemblage of modding.

Analysis Summary

Expectations and Exploits

With an exploration of playbour I found in the discourse a deviation in the expectations of mods expressed by modders participating in the *Reddit* forum, where the playbour of modders was not held to the same standards of paid game production. Modding was seen as a safer space to create game content and take risks. There is a famous example of this for *Fallout: New Vegas*, another Bethesda title with a similar toolset to *Skyrim*. After the game's release one of the lead designers, Josh Sawyer, released a rebalance mod that shifted all of the values toward a more challenging version of the

game- one that would have lacked mass appeal but found favour and fame among the mod community and PC fans of the game (Nexus Mods, "JSawyer Ultimate Edition"). While I found plenty of support in the discourse of the posts analysed indicating elements of playbour, there was not much in the way of modding as an extension of play. Rather, there was an apparent understanding of playbour as exploitative, just as Kücklich describes it (6). In the discourse it was also apparent that there was a careful guarding of the freedom of mods and the collaborative nature of mods. The posts analysed certainly were rejecting the paid mods program from Valve but also noting some elements of playbour which pointed to potentially exploitative playbour.

Collaboration over hijacking

In the analysed posts for produsage I identified elements of conflict between expectations for and against mods, in opposition to ideas around exploitation of seeing modding as a leisure activity. In addition to those discourses reflecting the literature, there was evidence of these users referencing the specific exploitations noted in produsage which Bruns calls 'hijacking the hive' ("Produsage", 5). This directly challenges Valve's monetization approach, with the theory of produsage informing the discourse present in the *AMA*. However, the posts examined with this lens also show that some of the mod community- perhaps the more empathetic segment- while still not supportive of paid mods, show an understanding that the divisive effects of monetizing *Skyrim* mods may have been unintentional. This rhetoric is ultimately echoed by Valve in their closing statements on the matter in their own website: "It is clear that we did not fully understand what we were doing" (Valve). The posts where produsage was used as the lens for analysis showed the mod community in favor of produsage as a frame for understanding mods and modding,

and against the 'hijacking the hive' in support of Bruns's ideas around produsage ("Produsage" 5).

The sum of its parts

In the analysis of assemblage of play, I found newly insightful (albeit unexpected) light to shed on the discourse of these posts. Not only were posts describing assemblage of play, but they were using assemblage to inform rhetorical argumentation. Moreover, the interplay of elements from assemblage of play was extremely fluid. The posts I looked at for *play* had much to say about the *social*, and the ones codified for *social* addressed *play*. There were insights here in the community around motivation, and the negative effect of attaching extrinsic values like money to something which in itself can be rewarding. This is in essence one of the intuitions which led me to this inquiry in the first place. It was encouraging to find that evidenced in the data. Finally, these threads were brought together and reinforced by the technical aspect with a description of how the systems of *Skyrim* modding reflect and facilitate the aforementioned modder passion and collaboration. The analysis of these posts was surprising in that I did not find what I expected, but gained a new understanding of the depth of the assemblage of play and how it works in understanding the discourse of the users in this *AMA*.

In conclusion

At a glance these posts may only appear to be complaining about modders being compensated for modding; that Valve's decision will cost mod users, that Valve is acting for profit and greed, which will break apart the community; or that this model of monetization is not a good business decision for Valve for logistical reasons. There are

some immediately evident arguments here around appropriation and hacker culture which are already well documented in existing research (Joseph; Moody). What I have done differently in my analysis is to apply the lenses of playbour, produsage, and assemblage of play to selected posts from the modding community to see if there was support for these theories in modder cultural discourse. When I first parsed the entire text without my discourse analysis approach, I thought there were no users addressing any of these; but upon closer analysis, these posts produced valuable insights which warrant further investigation.

Conclusions

In these concluding pages I summarise the results of my 2015 Gabe Newell AMA analysis in terms of modding as play, and in light of the cultural factors in the monetization of *Skyrim* mods. This analysis adds a new perspective to Valve's subsequent cancellation of the paid mods program. Much has changed since 2015; paid mods now exist, and the monetization of mods and paid fan content are part of the game industry. I address how this research is still very relevant, relating my findings to recent works by Hackman, Gallagher, and Joseph on *Skyrim*, as well as other relevant game studies research. I apply the analysis findings and insights more broadly to media studies and game studies in terms of what this case and these conclusions tell us about participatory production. Finally, I close by exploring emerging questions around what this might mean for other games and other media, and outline concepts and questions for much needed future research.

Overarching Recurrence

My discourse analysis of the *Reddit.com* AMA with Gabe Newell and the expression of modding in the analysed forum posts show that there are three distinct patterns echoed in posters' rhetoric: *Rejection of monetization, mods as acceptably flawed*, and the *intangible value of mods*. The theoretical frames I chose to compare with the comment data (*Producership, Playbour, Assemblage of Play*) were apparent throughout their discourse and provide some clues about why the paid mods were rejected by the

community. By synthesising these frames and patterns, my notion of modding as play gives insight into modder motivation in terms of *exploitation*, and in terms of *modding as a non-exploitive extension of play*.

One pattern echoed in all the reviewed posts is the rejection of the Valve paid mods program. Many of the posts call for reform or outright cancellation of their initiative. This is unsurprising in the context of this *AMA*, given that the *AMA* was in response to the backlash Valve had received over the sudden launch of the paid mods program a few days prior. This *AMA* was a forum set up to allow the community to express their displeasure, and was presented as such. By design the *Reddit.com AMA* with Valve CEO Gabe Newell was a venting of frustration over the paid mods program.

Another factor apparent in analyzing the posts overall was an understanding of mods and modding as flawed. There was a community understanding that the value of mods is different from professionally produced and monetized content updates and downloadable content packs. This difference in expectations was used by some posters to excuse mods from monetization, and by others to show problems for Valve in terms of liability.

Another consistent thread around value was the value of mods to PC games beyond monetization, and of that implied value being threatened by monetization. This has been previously articulated by Bruns's concept of 'hijacking the hive', and also questioned by Kücklich with his exploration of 'playbour.' It is well known that mods enhance sales performance and other factors of games, which then generate enhanced revenue (Postigo 602). I did not find evidence in the discourse which clearly supported the

idea of the appropriation of play beyond the mods, community, or technology. Play pertains more directly to the core values of gamer culture, but in the context of mods, or at least this monetization by Valve, there was not a strong sense of defending play itself as I had expected. I also did not find much discourse around valuing the process over the product. From my lived experience I know that modding as an activity is quite rewarding, in terms of co-operative community, problem solving, exploring, and pushing the limits of the game and computers themselves. However, from the posters' comments, I found reflections that were more about mods as a means to an end rather than a defence of the means itself. This was true even in terms of technology; when looking at produsage and playbour, it was always in the context of the resultant mods.

Presence of Theoretical Frames

The posts did show elements of each theoretical lens. To avoid bias when searching for evidence of these frames, I used a process of computer assisted content analysis sampling, and then conducted close readings of the analysed posts for rhetoric, signaling, and other meaning making through relevant contexts such as modder culture and technology. This was also a practical choice logistically. Without these methods, I might not have been able to find the relevant posts in the vast initial Q&A filtered dataset, let alone the entire 18,400+ posts of the *AMA*.

Produsage Outcomes

In my analysis I found the expression of rhetoric pertaining to produsage. Modding as leisure versus productivity and value were apparent in argumentation about the idea of "selling out", or that market driven production is worse than fan production. In addition,

there were certainly many instances in the data exemplifying critiques of hijacking the hive, which Bruns calls the worst form of appropriation or deriving value from produsage activities. This is a valuable insight for understanding the paid mods controversy in new ways. It highlights the elements of the monetization that, according to modders, went a step too far. If Valve had only used techniques of harnessing or harbouring the hive (Bruns, “Produsage” 5), the company might have had better success with this initial monetization attempt.

Playbour Outcomes

Playbour was also apparent in the discourse analysis for modders who addressed exploitative free labour. However, at the same time, users were writing that the playbour of modding was social, for fun, and for community enhancement, which reflects anti-commodification rhetoric. As I said in chapter 6, this is somewhat contradictory, but in the context of playbour these are essentially the same conflicting elements Kücklich exposes with the playbour concept itself. The expression of playbour elements in the posts support further investigations into modder culture with this playbour lens. The posts also echo ideas in the foundational media studies research like the aforementioned works of Postigo, Poor, and Sotamma. My exploration of playbour in modding through the posts from *Akatosh*, *Arkay* and *Dibella* revealed some perceived pros and cons of modding as playbour. There was a sense of exploitative production as thinly veiled play, or a monetization of extended play, which only happens to result in something of value. If the latter is true, perhaps some separation of the product from the process would be a better approach for understanding value in each. There is a sense of separating play from playbour, or at least the outcome of the mod, from the modding process which creates it.

This is not realistic though, because the technology, social, and engagement are interlaced, as we see with the lens of the assemblage of play.

Assemblage of Play Outcomes

Assemblage of play was also shown to be expressed in the discourse, albeit in unexpected ways. The social collaborative aspects of assemblage of play were interwoven with and exchanged with aspects of play and interaction. This brought forth the assemblage itself as an element in the discourse. The interchangeability of all the elements of the assemblage of play were less apparent in the heavily technical post by *Zenithar*, but were still present in their mention of the social interconnectivity and collaboration upon which the interdependent technology is reliant. Assemblage of play includes community itself as an element (Taylor 332). Through this work, I have come to understand that the *AMA* itself and these posts are actually a part of the assemblage of play in the context of modding. Seeing all of this, including the other two theoretical frames, as part of the assemblage and understanding of the activity of modding helps to shed new light on this paid mods controversy from 2015. It highlights the interrelations and interconnectedness of this decision throughout the culture, technology, and industry in which it was and still is embedded. Where the elements interconnect and interact there might be more to uncover. The assemblage of modding is an interplay of several interrelated elements which combine to help form a more robust understanding of mods and modder cultural practices and expectations.

The Mods Situation Now

This *AMA* occurred in 2015, when the forum discourse was interesting because of the sudden unprecedented nature of this mod commercialization and appropriation. Since then paid fan content has continued to spread and evolve. For example, modders on *Nexus Mods* have a donation button they can opt-into (Handrahan). Two years after their initial attempt Bethesda and Valve launched the much more closed and separated *Creation Club* (Bethesda Softworks) where a modder can 'go pro' by applying to create new content for the service as a development partner of Bethesda.

Creation Club is a collection of all-new content for both *Fallout 4* and *Skyrim*. It features new items, abilities, and gameplay created by Bethesda Games Studios and outside development partners including the best community creators. Creation Club content is fully curated and compatible with the main game and official add-ons. (Bethesda Softworks, "Creation Club")

Creation Club

This *Creation Club* content is limited in many ways, when compared to external modding content. In the *Creation Club* there is no ability to stack large mods, as previously described in Chapter 6. The collaborative compatibility and quality assurance is handled by Bethesda as a development studio and the modders who are employed in this program are treated as partners. This new monetization was designed and rolled out much differently from the program in 2015. It was not built in secret, but rather advertised far before its launch, allowing for criticism and some collaboration with mod community stakeholders. It is opt-in, as the 2015 version was, but the mods are also developed and published in a completely separate context from other mods as Bethesda licensed products with limited liability. This separates the *Creation Club* from the 2015 paid mods

controversy version, as modders are engaging in a sort of semi-professional development contract arrangement outside of the modding community. Clearly these organizations have learned much from the backlash of 2015, and now understand fan creation through more of an outsourcing model. However, this shift is also not without its own cultural implications. This new model presents an elite path for modders. The *Creation Club* page states that its modders are the very 'best' of the community, a distinction which signals enabled social capital (Bethesda Softworks). Participation through *Creation Club* is now an aspirational goal for some hobbyist modders hoping to break into the games industry. Others reject this new step as selling out, and continue to be leaders in the free mods communities (Handrahan).

Minecraft mods

Elsewhere on the internet, *Minecraft* has hosted free and paid content mods since Microsoft bought the company that developed it in 2014 (Mojang). Free *Minecraft* mods are still available through the channels they were before, but also on the official new *Minecraft* marketplace (Microsoft, Minecraft Marketplace). In the marketplace, not unlike the *Creation Club* for *Skyrim*, mods can be obtained by spending a currency in the game which can only be obtained with real money. There is resistance to this in modder communities, but with the massive scale of *Minecraft* and the separation of the *Microsoft Windows 10* version called 'Bedrock', Microsoft is able to separate the paid mods from the original and more heavily modded 'Java' version and allow the coexistence of mods and paid fan creations.

These new examples of stable paid mods exhibit factors which are apparent in the outcomes of my research, including hijacking the hive, assemblage of play, and tensions between produsage and playbour, exploitation and commodification. Valve also seems to have learned much from the controversy in 2015 and today avoids many of those early pitfalls. However, their current model still exhibits key fundamental issues brought forth in the posts analysed in this thesis. Valve is not addressing the cultural interdependence of mods, modders, industry, and gamers. They are not addressing the interdependence of the elements of the assemblage of play as technology, social, and play, as interdependent. The questions around what effect those have on consumer and mod user expectations, value perceptions, and engagement in the modding community warrants further exploration. This consideration of interplay, and assemblage will affect the success of other moddable Bethesda titles in the future. These paid mods programs show no signs of going away, whether they adopt the *Nexus Mods* donation model or the development partner arrangements of Bethesda's *Creators Club* and Microsoft's *Minecraft Marketplace*. New research into the expressions of modder culture in light of continued commodification of mods could explore the impact these more recent mod monetization approaches have had.

Relevance

The lenses of playbour, produsage, and assemblage of play are important tools in coming to a better understanding of cultural factors and industry limitations around paid mods moving forward. One example might be a 'playbour' mod monetization model with a new approach of 'harbouring the hive,' as opposed to hijacking the hive, the model that we saw in 2015. An example of a 'playbour' monetization model where 'harbouring' is

used might be that of the *Minecraft* Mods, where paid mods are separated from the participatory fan creations. With an understanding of assemblage of play, we can see the need for an inclusive consideration of all of the elements that contribute to modding. *Creation Club* tries to separate itself from its competition by subcontracting partners to isolate the assemblage elements from the broader modding scene. However *Creation Club* still interacts with the larger modding culture, still affecting it, and being still affected by free mods. Playbour exploitation becomes renegotiated in the separation between professional modding for money and the leisure or aspirational exploitation of community oriented modding. Certainly the presence of playbour in this discourse analysis points to its relevance in modding. Taking that theory into consideration with new market opportunity analysis and risk assessment for further monetisation of mods would be advisable for companies looking to capitalize on participatory production.

My modding fun

This research around modding, monetization, and play contributes to the existing work by Joseph and Moody on *Skyrim* and this particular mod monetization. Their work focused more specifically on appropriation and conflict, mapping the community and codifying based on trends. While commodification, greed, and property law are important to understanding why paid mods failed, I felt there was an element missing from their work and other existing scholarly work on mods. My experience leads me to echo the discourse seen here in modding culture that felt the payment structure Valve put in place was exploitative. I also see in the discourse from the posts analysed, that ownership and piracy are factors as well, something found in existing research, too (Joseph; Moody). Certainly paid mods did not fail solely because of factors of privacy and ownership, or because of

Valve's surprise rollout of paid mods program. There were other modder and gamer cultural tensions in 2015 kindled to flame by this paid mods program. I felt that the controversy, reactions, ideas being expressed by the subculture of modders could be better understood by looking at play. This is because as a modder in 2015 when this happened, I felt my own motivations to mod become suddenly compromised. I had no interest in making money with my mods in the community in which I was a collaborator. In fact, I rarely made my own mods. I would download other people's mods, play them, and find issues or places to improve them. I would then fix them, edit them, rebuild them, and enhance them with many hours of work, testing them as I went, playing with them and tweaking them all constantly, until I felt they were good enough to send back to the original mod authors. They would almost always adopt my changes, upload a new version and credit me in the mod file. So for me, the mods of *Skyrim* were my gameplay. Once I had completed the base game, modding provided another way to engage with the game as a text, and a never-ending aspirational ladder of progress for me to climb.

When Valve monetised the mods, they broke the fun for me. Through the lenses I explored in this research on play and fan production, I have been able to analyze this experience and see the expression of similar experiences echoed consistently in the discourse through all three of my chosen theoretical frames. This is not something Moody or Joseph might have been sensitive to, unless they too had been modders in this particular community. My analysis has shown that elements of produsage, assemblage of play, and playbour are apparent in the rhetoric against paid mods in the 2015 *AMA*, and that factors are interconnected with the perceptions of monetization of leisure production in the *Skyrim* mod community. These theories taken into consideration alongside the

equally relevant ideas brought forth by existing research on the *Skyrim* Mod monetisation offer a new perspective on modding and participatory online fan production of all kinds.

Mods as play in Media Studies

The monetization of mods continues to inform the larger issues of co-authorship, co-creation, fan production, and participatory online production in media studies. Mods are particularly interesting as a case study of playful production. As Kücklich describes, modding exists as an extension of gameplay. Other participatory production can be less leisurely, like amateur Youtubers engage in making short films, or novice radio hosts making podcasts. Those makers follow more the process of their respective industries in sound recording and film production. Modding, streaming, and to a certain extent e-sports, have activity and processes that are more similar to play. In modding there is extensive trial and error, deducing strategies, overcoming puzzles, and certainly reward loops in enhancing the game regularly with each new mod feature. These elements could inform better understandings and experiences of other participatory production contexts.

The elements of mod monetization and the theories I have focused on here are derived from theories in media studies which address broader issues of culture and media. In turn, the study of game mods as participatory production can provide useful insights for media and cultural studies more broadly. Terranova's free labour and Jenkins's convergence culture concepts address value driven by participatory production (Jenkins 2006a; Terranova 2000). The idea of mods feeding late capitalism is apparent in the discourse analysis through the lens of produsage. The idea of collective intelligence informs understanding of the collaborative aspects of modder culture and its importance

to participant modders. Conversely the collaborative interplay between the technological affordances of *Skyrim's* mods and its collaborative community shed new light on Terranova's collective intelligence and those foundational ideas of the internet as interconnected culturally.

Next Steps

My research takes up only a small facet of the complex context of mods and participatory production in general. There are many remaining questions. What could other participatory production practices learn from modding? What could concepts such as the assemblage of play, and produsage illuminate for the study of Youtubers and bloggers, for example? Could mods be monetized in less exploitative ways? Could mods be strengthened and newly inspired by the integration of technology with social collaborative elements and industry structures, to encourage more playful modes of creation? These questions are large, and further work is needed to explore other interesting potential elements apparent in the discourse of posts in this *AMA*, such as discrimination, intellectual property law, cognitive psychology focussing on motivation for modders in various contexts, and the process of market opportunity analysis around participatory fan production. The Valve mod monetization did not fail solely because of playbour and produsage being part of the discourse of the time. That is only one factor not covered in the existing research, and other lenses are likely missing. Even when those other important elements are discovered or verified, they will need to be combined to form a more comprehensive map of this complex collision of cultures, technologies, and perceptions. This more comprehensive map will be important to inform more culturally acceptable and less damaging monetization attempts for current and future media, such

as participatory production with emerging technologies like virtual reality. There are already participatory spaces like *Atspace VR* and *VR Chat* where users can produce content and share it freely. These spaces are ripe for monetization, and the similarities of those communities to those of traditional community-based modding might be comparable in the use of similar technologies and norms, value expectations and elements of assemblage. Using this thesis as a starting point, one interesting extension of this work would be to apply these theoretical frames to the discourse in the VR chat forums to see if those VR modders too express their modding practice in terms of play.

As monetization moves forward in late capitalist commodification of leisure (Postigo 602), playbour is precarious (Kücklich 7). Producers (Bruns, "Producers" 5) can be seen in terms of how to deal with a productive hive without getting stung. Understanding the interconnected assemblage as play (Taylor 332) as a whole and as its parts are equally important. These concepts of modding as an extension of productive play are important in understanding the interplay of value, culture, and monetization. Because without awareness of the underlying structures in a subculture of participatory production, hijacking might seem like a good monetization approach. After all, why would people, regardless of cultural factors, not want to get paid for their work? As it turns out, the *Skyrim* mod community did not want to get paid for their work, at least not in the way it was presented in 2015. An understanding of the interconnected factors at play in mod usage, production, and modder culture might have given valuable insight into that market opportunity for Valve. This is especially important considering the negotiated nature of modding as play, as an assemblage of technology, social, and community (Taylor 332). The culture of modding is motivated by the passion of sharing creative endeavors and

engaging with the game beyond play, as play. It is for many a productive, playful collaboration. Modding culture, technology and value is collaborative, but the hijacking monetization was divisive. Perhaps in the future a more collaborative, donation model would be accepted. Perhaps even better however, might be a separation of modding as playbour from modding labour by the concept of pro-modding as in Bethesda's *Creation Club*. Leaving the collaborative creative space of mods and modder culture as a foundation and building a separate layer for the complications presented by monetization is a way to move mod monetization forward without hijacking the hive. A distinction between modding, and pro-modding, might allow those who engage with mods as assemblage of play, playbour, and produsage to operate as separate from modders who are interested in the semi-professional modes of engagement offered by monetized mod production.

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Appendix

This is a resultant dataset from sampling through content analysis as outlined in Chapter 6, referenced throughout Chapter 7.

The data is unaltered except for the names of the nine posters being replaced by the *Nine Divines*. in accordance with the guidelines in the most recent *Internet Research: Ethical Guidelines 3.0* (Franzke et al)

Playbour - Julian Kücklich

Akatosh
9 points · [4 years ago](#)

Gabe, there are already 5000+ comments so I don't know if you'll read mine, but if you do: please, please don't go through with this, or make some changes to the system. Mods have always been a core part of the PC gaming experience, created by passionate individuals looking to improve or change a game. Texture packs, weapon mods, maps, UI tweaks... The list goes on.

Mods have always been free, with most creators only asking for donations. The passion of the creators drives communities and encourages modders to work together. Gamers like myself understand the "ground rules" of mods... They may not always work, they may be abandoned, they may be limited in scope and unsupported. However, they have never had a cost. Now, Valve comes in and sees fit to change a system that has worked fine for years, and on top of that is taking a 75% cut. I don't see how you guys think this is okay.

Now developers profit directly off modders, with zero effort on their part. Why offer fleshed out, fully featured games when your community will create features for you, all while essentially paying for the privilege to do so? Now, if my mod breaks or is unsupported, I've thrown money out the window. And this seems like it cheapens the passion of modders, or adds a degree of cynicism to it.

There are issues such as the ones I've mentioned above, but for my final argument I would just say this: I look at this move by Valve and in my gut I can tell you it feels wrong. This is a terrible, awful thing to do, and it ruins one of the core parts of the PC

gaming experience. On a console you've got to pay to play, for every little thing. On the PC, we are able to enjoy the work of those who create solely for the purpose of creating. The individual is empowered and praised, not stifled and constrained.

Gabe, the reason people like you and Valve is because (for the most part) you are player-centric. You offer a platform that provides reasonably priced games quickly and easily. Your company has been a counterweight to the EAs and Ubisofts of the industry, even if you sell their games. This is why we hold you and Valve to a higher standard. Please, please, please meet that standard on this topic, and do the right thing. Thank you.

Arkay

3 points · [4 years ago](#)

gabe, i have worked for corporations my entire adult life. i like to think i know how companies think. how on or off the mark am i with this assessment

it's like this, and here is where the rubber meets the road: steam is a store that valve has the right to profit from. games are products that the devs have a right to profit from. mods are services that the modder has a right to profit from. all of those are statements of fact, each one has required work time effort and energy to build. there is not a single pre-columbian native american that walked up to a bend in the river, took a drink, and accidentally got a mouthful of games. people had to make them. but we have a culture. the fact is, steam is more than a marketplace, games are more than just the wooden dolls and board games they used to be, and mods are more than just a spin on a classic. there is a culture that surrounds them, there are expectations. they can be hobbies, proof of concepts, resumes. people have been rewarded for their work with fame and jobs. i think a donation button is the best of all of that. everybody involved deserves fair compensation for the work that they've done, but i don't think the culture that surrounds mods now should be monetized like valve just did it.

Dibella

256 points · [4 years ago](#)

From a practical perspective, the problems I have with it are these -

- The most popular mods right now (including SkyUI) are mods that fix bad design in the original game. SkyUI is going behind a paywall, and it promotes bad design in games and rewards the developers for fixes the community makes.
- The share the modders get is way too low. 25% is a joke.
- Stolen content. Modders now need to spend a portion of their time skimming the workshop to make sure their mods aren't being hosted without their permission.
- It is hurting the mod community directly, people are taking down their mods that have been free for years on sharing sites like Nexus because they are worried about others using their mod without permission, or they are doing so in protest, or they are doing so in preparation to put it behind a paywall.
- There is no guarantee these mods will be supported and will work with our games after updates, which is acceptable if they're free, not so much if we've paid for them.

From the emotional perspective... the modding scene was really cool. It was beautiful to see people doing something for fun to make a game they loved better, and cooperating with others for the sake of enjoyment. Many mods relied on other mods and were packed together showing this big collaborative effort, and over night all those people have turned on each other due to some cashing in, others protesting those cashing in by removing their mods from those modpacks and refusing for them to be used, it's all toxic. Overnight. Yeah, people didn't always get along, but this is ridiculous.

People keep saying "modders deserve to be compensated for their hard work" and if you feel that way, nexus has or is implementing a donation system. Use it. But no, I disagree that they deserve payment. Just because you work hard on something doesn't mean you necessarily deserve a paycheck for doing it. People do lots of things that require a hell of a lot of time and effort, such as leading gaming communities, running guilds, hell, even playing some games can be hard work to be the best. That doesn't mean everybody should be paid for it. The mod community was beautiful because of what it was and throwing money into the situation does nothing to make it better.

Prodosage - Axel Bruns

Julianos

4 points · [4 years ago](#)

CS is a mod of half life that I bought. I don't mind paying for quality content. I think the way this was introduced was poor with very little discussion with the community on Valves part. What is your response to that and why is it a situation that was allowed to exist in the first place?

I do mind getting nickel and dimed for games to make them enjoyable/playable and fear this is where things are headed in the name of profit and greed. Or poorly hashed unfinished content for pennies that is 'eh' good enough with little to no quality standards or control.

I think the other argument is valid as well. It is one thing to take spare time to produce free content for a game that you really enjoy and share that with the community. When you introduce 'the market' and money in to the situation I like many others feel somethings is lost and generally leads to a drop in quality and community from that point forward if the transition isn't managed, understood and curated well from the start.

Lets not mention one of the worst developer profit splitting deals in the history of e markets. Modders are yes using developer released tools and the developer has a fair claim to be reimbursed for use of their software, and Valve is running the backend as a host and payment processor but any other app store takes 1/3rd of what you are taking from modders. Is it in line with other game engine licensing fees or are modders paying a premium?

Was it an attempt to limit the economic exploitation of the workshop marketplace and could that have been communicated better?

Mara

25 points · [4 years ago](#) · edited 4 years ago

I love Valve. I seriously do. Being a 4-year-long user I was exposed to everything right about gaming and what made the environment for PC gamers so special. Valve always had the best intentions and decisions for the gamers. I spoke to my cousin (and her husband) only 2 weeks ago who both work at HTC on how teaming up with Valve for vive is literally the best thing that could ever happen. I believe the implementation of a workshop where there is paid modding does not work, and that even though Valve did it with good intention, nobody involved had a clear idea on modding more than 100-hour + heavy mod user with regards to how the modding system and the community functions. Here is why:

1. The introduction of pay/free mods divides the community. Examples of this include resource modders completely stepping out of the game and modders who make important framework mods behind a paywall. The community is separated not because of a lack of money to pay for mods or anything of that sort, but rather by their ideals.
2. Certain games like tf2 or dota have "mods" that function very simplistically. None of it changes how the game operates from within, most of them are cosmetics. It is also important to highlight here that people are willing to pay for items in tf2 or dota because they are free-to-play and are online games. The free-to-play nature means that such a source of revenue is justified and the online part means that its a game where users have to abide to dev rules when customizing the game to their liking. Skyrim is a singleplayer game which means there is no need to abide to such rules and it would be ridiculous to do so.
3. Mods are not official DLC, nor are they available after a QC from Valve. They are just straight up available if it isn't something ridiculous (sexually suggestive or whatnot). However, they might break/do something to your save on their own (yes, even armor mods), bring instability which may not be an easy find at first, and more importantly they can interact in other mods in incompatible ways. This is something that is simply unavoidable due to how the esp system in Skyrim works. A lighting mod can conflict with a follower mod for instance. Mod authors then get angry customers who claim that their mods don't work and there could literally be 1 billion reasons as to why that is so. I can guarantee that anyone who uses steam workshop for Skyrim modding has next to 0 clue on how to spot these errors on their own, because the way how the workshop auto-updates subscribed mods for instance just shows the lack of user-control and is just plain terrible.
4. Mod authors will no longer be sharing knowledge and teaching one another on the release of FO4/ES6 and the new creation kit. Everyone is trying to get an

advantage on the know-hows and will use that to get a competitive advantage on their workshop creations. Instead of an influx of brilliant works because of \$\$\$, people will start keeping sh*t to themselves and creative progression will mature at a snail's pace.

5. Stealing content from other mod authors will run rampant. How are we supposed to police content when all we have are a few author images to judge whether they are using original assets? The guy could make a dungeon mod and show off parts of it that doesn't include stuff from bob. I mean sure you could buy it then and find out, but you would have to know a lot about resource mods to do so. Would the customers even report the mod? Say they buy it and are super cool with the product then why should they call it out when they would, perhaps, get cool updates every once in a while which make that product even better? I'm sure this is going to be one of those issues that will get found out eventually and is more of a non-issue but I'm just speaking hypotheticals here.

6. Some people use tons of mods. I use approximately 800 mods for Skyrim, and I'm not even counting what I've tried or experimented in the past. Let's say each of them costs 50 cents. My current configuration of Skyrim would then cost 400 bucks. Yeah that's right 400bucks for a game that is not bug-free, fully-optimized, and heavily relies on the know-hows of the user to even remain playable. How is that fair, I ask? Let's say the whole thing works, and people agree on paid mods and it is the norm. No-one is ever going to be running around with a mod library with over 500 mods or anything crazy like that and work visual magic anymore which was honestly one of the best ways the game was advertised.

I'm sure there are a lot of other reasons that I just can't properly put myself to remember of or articulate right now. A lot of these points I'm making are also how I feel personally. But whatever it is, the modding scene was completely fine as it was. It's not too late to turn everything back. I feel this entire thing was just Valve not knowing how modding in Skyrim works honestly, and it shows with how steam workshop functions and now this stunt that is completely out of touch with the modding scene. I suggest you guys at valve read some of what people have to say at subreddits like [/r/skyrimmods](https://www.reddit.com/r/skyrimmods) where fine arguments are easier found. Thanks for reading this Valve.

Assemblage of play - TL Taylor

Stendarr

10 points · ~~4 years ago~~ · edited 4 years ago

Here's what gets me... Mods have been the extra lifeblood of pc gaming, for me since I started playing Doom95 20 years ago.

They have given me and every other single pc gamer a lifetime extension on our favorite games and changed some of our lives.

When my mother first bought me Half-life I loaded it up and pressed Quick Online, this sent me through WON to a TFC server.

Little did I know I was actually playing a mod for HL and it completely blew my mind when I tried singleplayer to find out there was a completely different game. It was so mysterious and expansive, and amazing! Oh what laid in store for me... It didn't take me long to find a PLETHORA of FREE games I could play because I had bought this one game!! I had Firearms, Ricochet, Action Half-life, That scientist and Industry, Box hunt, Runaway Train, Counter-strike (I read about it in a gaming magazine and lusted for it like a wild animal...) They hunger, DOD, and endless amount of others...

I thought at the time this was the single best game that could of ever existed. (I still do).

I met a friend playing some HL mod some late night, and he had a server. He loaded up a map he made and explained how I could do the same. That moment changed my life. Although when I finally installed WorldCraft from the HL CD I hadn't quite wrapped my head around orthogonal geometry yet (I was around 9-10 years old, Lol).

All I could make was huge, flat rectangular blocks. No concept of leaks, skyboxes, etc. Now i'm 25 and i've been building levels for every single game that has an available level editor for over HALF of my life.

What else could this game do? A decade of counter-strike and day of defeat, probably by now 50 thousand of hours on WON and then STEAM games... followed me when I picked up Tribes 2 and Rainbow Six: Rogue Spear later and basically every other game I've ever played. This is why I am a PC gamer, it's in my heart and blood. I'm downloading new tracks, gear, and bikes for MX simulator right now! I gave the sole creator 42 dollars and he seems to have no problem with the THOUSANDS of free HD models and skins that we can instantly use for free to enhance his game! The modders certainly never have more than a donate button because they're using it online too!

These modders were my heroes and I have spent decades learning how to be like them. I know how to build levels, make models, unwrap and texture, make normals, zbrush, normals, collision, etc etc.

When my friends bought consoles I was embarassed for them to find out they had to pay for a subscription JUST to play these stock games online! OR that the ONLY thing they could add or change was in DLC form and it meant they were paying for every single thing from new weapons, locations to freakin desktop backgrounds! Saints Row I believe had the GTA character customization screen, except most of the extras, from sunglasses to purple suits cost them hard cash. This is a pathetic excuse for gaming when you've grown up with the experience I have. This is not the way I want PC GAMING TO GO! I am not against modders possibly earning some cash for their work but a paywall is most certainly NOT the way for pc gaming!

I don't know why i'm explaining this, I just want you to know how much you, Gabe (even if you'll probably never read this bs wall of text), and the free mods your game exposed me to have directly and indirectly effected my life. I just can't fathom how different my experience had been if TFC was a 10.00\$ mod, or I hadn't played CS before it went retail...

Basically, you leaving Microsoft to start your own business and John Carmack's parents buying him a computer were some of the best things to ever happen to me!

Kynareth
199 points · [4 years ago](#)

"Skyrim is a great example of a game that has benefited enormously from the MODs. The option for paid MODs is supposed to increase the investment in quality modding, not hurt it." - Gabe

Can we talk about this a bit more? Because this seems to be the root of the problem. I think you were ill-advised on the economic impacts of monetization of something that was once free. I fear Varoufakis' departure has left a hole in Valve's understanding of human behaviour and economics.

Costs and rewards can take many forms, not just financial forms, and when you push one specific "currency type" (pride/guilt, money and social capital can all fit into this concept) as a means to acquire a service or product, you push out the others, sometimes for a long time.

There's actually a [study on day-cares in Israel](#) that illustrates that point really well. Many people know it from Freakonomics and/or some form of low-level Econ class. To summarize; parents often came to get their children late, forcing day-care employees to stay at work longer than their scheduled hours, creating problems. Following the idea that financial costs are deeply linked to human incentives, the day-care centers elected to put a financial price on late pick-ups, in order to discourage them. The complete opposite happened. Because of the appearance of the financial cost associated with the late pick-ups, parents stopped feeling the moral cost of being late and negatively impacting the day-cares' workers. They felt entitled to being late as long as they paid. The problem grew worse.

What's the link to this current predicament? By opening monetization of mods you're going to push away modders who made things for their personal pride and/or social capital, and you'll bring in those who make things solely for money. This won't just make the old modders sad, it'll make your workshops an absolute shitfest. Actual modders will get their mods stolen, it'll take massive manhours to try and regulate the market, and the quality modders will simply move on to other things, disgusted. What you'll be left with is the typical app store shovelware, with the customer raging as he tries to find a mod that's actually worth acquiring. Everybody loses, even the scammers (who only lose time).

I truly think you should consider the proposal to let people donate to modders. Valve and the devs can still get a cut of revenue (say 40%) and everyone will be happy about it. Why you didn't go with this option is, to be very honest, rather surprising.

ps: I'm available to work on these things with you guys since I'm finishing my M.Sc. like... right now.

Talos
31 points · [4 years ago](#)

I never wanted capitalism in my socialist modding community.

These are not mods anymore, these are company-sponsored third party DLC without warranty, guarantee and quality control. Under this new system we will see lesser big mods that were once a community effort. You'll only see the marketplace flooded with single item assets like weapons and armor being sold. You'll see popular gameplay additions be bloated with Free-2-Play mechanics like pop-up notices, ads, and likes/shares for extra content. I don't want PC Gaming being reduced to what the mobile market has become, a cesspool of crap that floods the market so much that real gems have no place left to shine.

What about the future? If this ends up profitable for Bethesda they'll just end up making future games with lax content all in hopes of exploiting money from the modding community.

As a long time mod creator who started all the way back in Doom, I'm frustrated, mad and now sadden because my hobby is being ruined by people wanting to make a quick buck, from the creators themselves to Valve to Bethesda. I have a job to pay my bills, I make content for games because I enjoy doing it, and I want other people to enjoy it too. Mods add value to a game, it's why I bought Skyrim in the first place, it was my first TES title. If a lot of content gets locked behind paywalls, that value diminishes quickly.

Having the option of paid mods makes me never want to release mods ever again for enabled workshops, even free. I don't have unlimited man hours to look through the workshop to see if someone is profiting off of portions of my work, and neither do you Valve. When authors upload their work do they even retain rights to it? I know Second Life added terms that any assets uploaded to their servers becomes part-property of Linden Labs.

I know you'll ignore the cries of the community while counting a percentage of the money rolling in. You've made yourself quite clear, I'm no longer your target audience. That's fine by me, I'll go somewhere else that is for me.

Zenithar
7 points · [4 years ago](#)

It's pretty clear from this AMA that neither Gabe or Valve understands what modding in Skyrim, or any Bethesda studio game entails. It is not the clean stand alone process in a source engine game. The Frankenstein gambryo mess that is used in Skryim requires help in 3rd party software.

Any mod that is not a retexture or new item has dependencies on more than the official tool set. They may require the use of a script extender like SKSE. They may require the installation of the unofficial patches that address the bugs left over or introduced from official patches and DLC. They will probably have dependencies on mods that provide frameworks to enable to quests, behaviors, monsters, NPC, events, and locations. So your one mod will require SKSE, FNIS, Fuz Ro D-oh - Silent Voice, SkyUI, MCM, each required mod may have it's own required mods.

Then you will need a mod manager to ensure the proper load order of the .esp and .esm files. The Frakenbyro engine will load mods before official DLC, resulting in CTD on startup. Once the mod load order is correct you may need to fire up TES5Edit to make sure the mods are "clean" and to spot conflicts that will result in CTD.

Mod creation for Skryim is an interconnected spiderweb of dependancies. This pay for mod workshop has just splintered that network of interconnected mods that require each other to work. While paying for mods might not be bad in itself, this was the wrong game with the wrong engine to run this test with. Bethesda would have to rectify the shortcomings and design flaws in their game engine to remove that required mod interdependence, something they have been steadfastly against.

Curriculum Vitae

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Conference Presentations:

"How to Break into the Canadian Video Game Industry". Media Arts and Cultures,
University of New Brunswick. Fredericton, NB. (Feb 18, 2012).

"Game Design 101 - Workshop". Jalloo Festival for Animation and Games, NBCC
Miramichi. Miramichi, NB. (June 21, 2012).

"State of the Game Industry - Panel". Jalloo Festival for Animation and Games, NBCC
Miramichi. Miramichi, NB. (June 21, 2012).

"State of the Game Industry - Panel". Jalloo Festival for Animation and Games, NBCC
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"How to Pitch a Game Idea- Workshop". Jalloo Festival for Animation and Games,
NBCC Miramichi. Miramichi, NB. (June 20, 2013).

"Game Production with a Team - Seminar". Gaming and animation Institute Of
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"Perspectives in Game design - Seminar". Jalloo Festival for Animation and Games,
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"State of the Game Industry - Panel". Jalloo Festival for Animation and Games, NBCC
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"How to get into the Industry - Seminar". Jalloo Festival for Animation and Games,
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“UX Design for Games- Workshop”. Jalloo Festival for Animation and Games, NBCC Miramichi. Miramichi, NB. (June 11, 2015).

“State of the Game Industry -Panel”. Jalloo Festival for Animation and Games, NBCC Miramichi. Miramichi, NB. (June 11, 2015).

“Game Studies Research: Works in Progress- Co-presenter/Panel”. Jalloo Festival for Animation and Games, NBCC Miramichi. Miramichi, NB. (June 11, 2015).

“Balance and Behaviourism In Game Design - Seminar ” . Jalloo Festival for Animation and Games, NBCC Miramichi. Miramichi, NB. (June 12, 2015).

“How to get into the Industry - Seminar” . Jalloo Festival for Animation and Games, NBCC Miramichi. Miramichi, NB. (June 9, 2016).

“Game Design for Mobile - Seminar ” . Jalloo Festival for Animation and Games, NBCC Miramichi. Miramichi, NB. (June 10, 2016).

“GUIDE - Popup Arcade - Showcase ”. Congress - CGSA, Ryerson University. Toronto, ON. (May 31, 2017).

“State of the Game Industry - Panel ” . Jalloo Festival for Animation and Games, NBCC Miramichi. Miramichi, NB. (June 15, 2017).

“Live-Ops Design for Mobile - Seminar ” . Jalloo Festival for Animation and Games, NBCC Miramichi. Miramichi, NB. (June 16, 2017).

“The Future of Virtual Reality - Panel ” . Animaritime, Fredericton Conference Center. Fredericton, NB. (July 1, 2017).

“Liveops Design for Mobile: Continuous Expansions and Updates for Your Game”. Jalloo Festival for Animation and Games, NBCC Miramichi. Miramichi, NB. (June 15, 2018).

“State of the Game Industry - Panel ” . Jalloo Festival for Animation and Games, NBCC Miramichi. Miramichi, NB. (June 15, 2018).

“Live Ops & Design”. Game Developers Atlantic, Hal-Con. Halifax, NS. (October 24th, 2019)