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RPS FEATURE "the modder-industry relationship"

[A People's History Of The FPS, Part 2: The Mod](#)

By [Robert Yang](#) on September 20th, 2012 at 1:00 pm.

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"A People's History" is a three part essay series that argues for a long-standing but suppressed tradition of amateur involvement in the first person genre. This is part two. [Here's part one.](#)

"Amateur" may mean unprofessional or of lower quality, but [it's also French for "lover."](#) Even if it's difficult and time-consuming, even if you're 15 years old and you have to figure out this complex physics engine to try out a cool idea you have — it's because you love it.

I was 15 when I joined [Nightwatch](#), an epic Half-Life 1 mod made by a dream team of veteran modders, replete with new weapons, voice acting, monsters, scripted sequences, and a 10 hour single player campaign with 99% custom art. We were the Black Mesa Source of the Half-Life 1 community, except we never released anything.

Maybe that's because we didn't really love modding. In fact, we hated modding.

Well, we loved game development, but we slightly resented our status as amateurs when we were already producing "professional quality" work. Many of us aspired to "break into" the AAA game industry, and working on a mod to develop a portfolio was one of the entrances.

Basically, we modded because modding meant you could quit modding.

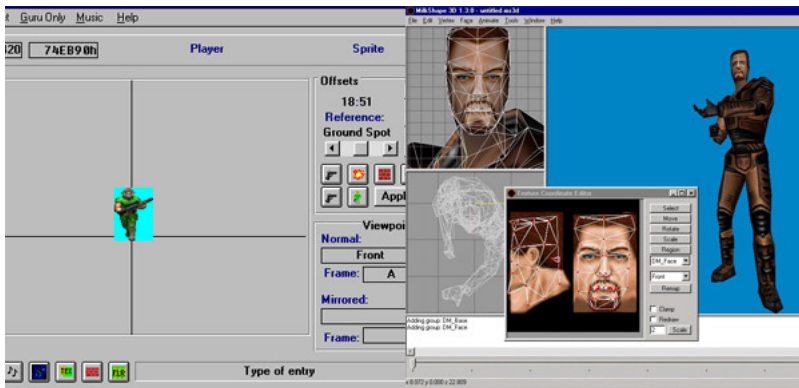


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At the time, there had already been a long history of mods going retail (Doom Master Levels, Final Doom, Team Fortress Classic, etc.) and of modders going professional (Tim Willits at id from Master Levels; Dario Casali at Valve from Final Doom; Robin Walker at Valve from Quake Team Fortress — and fun fact, on April 13th, 1997, TF 2.5a was the first FPS to have headshots. We should celebrate Headshot Day.)

So people kept leaving Nightwatch to join various first person studios with non-compete clauses: Raven, Gearbox, id, Infinity Ward, Splash Damage, Valve. But of course, our mod failed for many reasons, and staff turnover was just one contributing cause. Besides, how can you stay upset at someone for fulfilling their dream and achieving success for their hard work?

Indeed, modding was quite a lot of work, and the nature of the work kept changing too:



A “new monster” in Doom was a reskinned demonhog with increased movement speed. In Half-Life, a “new monster” entailed a custom modeled .MDL with UVs / textures / animations as well as C++ hooks for the squad AI to access animations, bone controllers, and weapon attachments. And now in Source, many modders feel a “new monster” requires them to bake a high-poly sculpt down to a normal map, configure ragdoll properties / joint constraints, and script response rules for lip-synced voice-over to react with battle line / squad assault coordinators... and so on.

This increase in production followed conventional wisdom: that making games was getting harder and more expensive with each engine generation, and thus so must modding. It suggests the escalation was inevitable when, in fact, it wasn't.

We forced mods to get bigger. We started saying that all characters SHOULD have high poly sculpts, that textures SHOULD have high resolution normal maps, that mods SHOULD have a custom menu screen, a new HUD, and different crosshair designs. And when we defined add up all these “shoulds”, they often had more to do with what looked like an AAA game because that's where we wanted to work. “It doesn't even look like a mod!” was (and still is) one of the highest compliments your posed marketing screenshot could garner, yet a “total conversion” was regarded as the ultimate mod, the moddiest mod.



The best mods didn't want to look like mods. Nothing exemplifies this attitude better than the production porn of Half-Life 2 mods: mod teams publishing renders of benches, trash heaps, planks, and mundane light fixtures. They wanted to emphasize the sheer amount of time and effort lavished into realizing even the most trivial of details, just like a real AAA game.

That's because we had an inferiority complex. We were obsessed with compensating for our weaknesses (lack of asset production capability, no funding, no on-site coordination, no proven credibility or esteem) so much that we constantly forgot our strengths (quick iteration, no stakeholders to answer to, a ready-made library of retail assets to use) despite Valve pleading, [please don't try to copy the game industry](#).

Compared against the wild frontier of early Doom modding dominated by veteran hackers / open-source renegades appropriating pop culture without permission, this era of modding was tamed farmland where teenagers manufactured countless AK-47s to varying degrees of accuracy. We were poorly run factories with a 99% failure rate.



Now, domestication does offer many benefits for the domesticated. Domestication is bad for some things, but great for other things:

Common values and engines allowed us to build communities long before the critical mass of engine libraries that made today's indie games scene possible, and I still keep in touch with modders who are now in the industry. We learned a lot from each other, and we were perhaps the last large generation of self-taught game developers. Also, it was awesome to have an army of professionals develop stable engine technology, balanced combat mechanics / weapon feel, and gather asset libraries for us to use — the game industry was doing a lot of heavy lifting and kind of making our own games for us.

Which was convenient, because most of us wanted to make what the industry made anyway.

This "Silver Age of FPS modding", stretching approximately from early Quake mods to the twilight of Source Engine modding on Source SDK Base 2007, was marked by **the mod community's synchronicity with the AAA game industry's value system**. It celebrated conceptually slight deviation from the manshooter template, high asset production capacity, advanced technical expertise, and perceived hyper-realistic visual polish. This process domesticated modders and prepared them for possible recruitment into the AAA industry, thus separating amateur professionals from professional amateurs in the community.



I'm not saying people still don't make large total conversions, or that this value system is obsolete. There will be plenty of modders to remake City 17 in Source 2, due for release in 2018. **When I say "mods are dead," I mean that this "Silver Age" concept of the mod is much less prominent and relevant to younger modder communities today.** Many people don't think about mods like this anymore, though it's okay if you do. It's just... problematic.

Because these days, the modder-industry relationship is much more complicated. Studios are closing and the AAA industry is consolidating; laid-off and burnt-out veterans leave the industry with cautionary tales and war stories. The common practice of mandated work on weekends / associated sleep deprivation, or "crunch" in the game industry, has been publicized and deromanticized by whistleblowers. It's enough to give pause to aspiring amateurs and students, to suggest that breaking into the AAA industry might be like breaking into a prison.

So if you're not modding to get into the industry, then why mod? What, because you love it?

Next time, part 3: the Golden Age of FPS modding, when modding drifts further away from the AAA value system and develops its own aesthetics and purposes.

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1. [20/09/2012 at 13:10](#) Tom De Roeck says:

You might find this interesting: <http://www.develop-online.net/blog/242/Sorry-tech-cant-save-crunch>

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2. [20/09/2012 at 13:14](#) Ansob says:

This is a really good post and you hit on what I think was definitely the main contributor to the downfall of Source modding. Thanks for writing it, Mr Yang.

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[20/09/2012 at 21:49](#) Quarex says:

I did enjoy this article quite a bit as well, though I think it is worth noting that part of the reason the "total conversion"-style modding died down is not because people were herded like sheep into believing that they should just do what the big studios were doing, but because their projects were shut down by intellectual property lawyers. It was not at all totally a self-policing/domesticating issue as you seem to be suggesting (though I apologize if that was just the impression I got, not your intent).

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[21/09/2012 at 09:24](#) Nate says:

There were TCs that were shut down like that. But I think the actual ratio of announced TCs to released TCs was something like 1 in 20, 1 in 50 maybe. If Quake:Aliens got shut down (did it? i seem to remember playing it), that doesn't mean that the aliens TC ever would have got made.

Even given that, it's not so hard to avoid IP infringement. So what if your Space Marines become Planetary Assault Soldiers? If anything, the reliance on existing IP (and inability to recover when denied it) demonstrated one of the common failings of TC teams: a failure of imagination.

But I don't think that there was a silver age of modding (look to Skyrim, CK Game of Thrones, Day Z); I don't think that modders were motivated out of something besides a love of games and modding (they just wanted to be in a position to get paid to do it, and to get more people to look at their work); I don't think Myst failed where Doom succeeded because of the ease with which either game could be modded. It's true that iD set a standard for moddability that has somehow persisted to this day, but Doom became iconic because of Doom, not because of mods for Doom. An introductory level without activity reminds me less of Dear Esther than of Half-life. And first-person games are not synonymous with violence (every locked room game in the world will bear witness to that), but that's easy to forget because "first person" never really entered our gaming lexicon, because it isn't that important of a property, whereas "first person shooter" turned out to be indispensable enough that we can't mention two words of it without imagining the third. ("Shooter" being undeniably violent.)

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[21/09/2012 at 12:40](#) hewhosayszonk says:

I used to be in a mod team working on a Stargate mod for HL2, and we were never hit by the cease-and-desist fairies – because we got in touch with the studio at the outset and explained our project, and because we didn't use any material from the show aside from the setting and aesthetic. We watched a lot of other SG mods get shut down, and we benefitted from it – we had several influxes of new members from other mods as they ended.

At the end of the day we died because we had the talent, but not the organisation, of a game studio. We had some great coders, good-to-great mappers and honestly, more modelers than we needed. But we didn't have any coherent plan, we didn't have any idea of what the finished game would be like, and there was no-one with a "big picture" view – the modelers produced models, the mappers produced maps, the coders produced code, but it never really came together, and the whole thing "slowly collapse[d] like a flan in a cupboard", to steal from Eddie Izzard. We even made it to a playable alpha with zat pistols, but by that time it was basically dead.

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3. [20/09/2012 at 13:17](#) MistyMike says:

Is that... the Old Town square in Warsaw in that last picture...?

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20/09/2012 at 13:29 *jha4ceb* says:

Yep. Looking just like City 17, don't you think? ;-)

[Log in to Reply](#)



20/09/2012 at 13:46 *reyn78* says:

Picture has to come from quite some time ago. Those Okocim outdoor seating "umbrellas" are long long gone. Nice picture though. CS 1.6 in Warsaw surroundings sounds cool.

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20/09/2012 at 15:32 *Cinek* says:

CS 1.6 WITH a WarSaw sounds even more cool.

[Log in to Reply](#)



20/09/2012 at 15:44 *pepperfez* says:

SAWFACE?



21/09/2012 at 03:33 *narugo5445* says:

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=uqA8JOPajvA>

So if you're not modding to get into the industry, then why mod? What, because you love it?



4.

20/09/2012 at 13:18 *Nathal3* says:

I am very much enjoying this essay. RPS: more of this, please

[Log in to Reply](#)



5.

20/09/2012 at 13:19 *sonofsanta* says:

I just logged in to post a comment on t'other post and saw this at the top of the main page, so I'll say it here: jolly good show chap, marvellous read and all that.

Gaming (and the journalism therein) has, for a very long time, been largely dominated by the marketers view of the industry, where alternative histories like this have just... not been around. So it's wonderful to read these takes on events.

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6.

20/09/2012 at 13:20 *VileJester* says:

Although it is true that "amateur" originally means "lover", I want to point out that it is mostly used to designate a "beginner" or a "novice" in France.

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o

20/09/2012 at 13:37 *Ansob* says:

Not true – amateur d'art/de musique/de fine cuisine/etc. are all frequently used, and they definitely mean "lover of" and not "beginner."

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o

20/09/2012 at 13:42 *Charles de Goal* says:

Indeed, "lover" in modern French would be "amant" or sometimes "amoureux" (edit: I mean "lover" as in loving a person).

In French, “amateur” can have several meanings: it can be “non-professional” (e.g. an “amateur” actor is an actor who works for free). It can also be someone who craves something : an “amateur de bons vins” is someone who has developed a taste and judgement for good wines. Therefore, “amateur” is close to “hobbyist” in some contexts.

However, being a beginner or a novice is not implied, although the term can have that connotation when used in a pejorative sense (“oh, that guy... he’s just an amateur”).

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20/09/2012 at 14:01 *VileJester* says:

Well yeah actually you’re right guys, and you explained it way better than I could have done myself. Thanks for that.

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7.

20/09/2012 at 13:24 *SuperNashwanPower* says:

So the article is sort of saying, get modders to think more like Indies? I wish I had spent some of my youth learning code. Furthest I got was a bit of BASIC. Getting my C64 to write

BOTTOM
BOTTOM
BOTTOM
BOTTOM
BOTTOM

Yup.

[Log in to Reply](#)



20/09/2012 at 20:32 *The Random One* says:

Roll 1d4 for reply:

- 1) Not what I’d call top quality work.
- 2) Sounds like you were an ass back then.
- 3) I won’t judge – maybe you worked your butt off on that!
- 4) WARBOTTOM

[Log in to Reply](#)



21/09/2012 at 11:25 *SuperNashwanPower* says:

You can’t call a 6 year old an ass. All 6 year olds are asses. Then they grow up to become bankers and IT department telephone operatives.

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8.

20/09/2012 at 13:30 *Joe W-A* says:

I’m loving these. Takes me back to my own 15-year-old modding youth.

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9.

20/09/2012 at 13:31 *plumbob* says:

I started coding around ten, back in the mid ninties. I, like most other geeky kids, wanted to make games. Indeed I participated in quite a few mods with a similar 99% failure rate. After seeing that, and the stories of people sleeping under their desks, never seeing family, and generally being lorded over by petty tyrants in suits sucking all the creativity out of the room I left that dream far behind.

Now I write code for a middling sized American bank. My tasks are not very creative, or particularly interesting. They rarely present interesting problems or challenge my skills. But, I make a handsome salary and leave work at 4pm every day.

AAA games seem like a silly idea now, why go somewhere that won’t pay very well, where I won’t have any time to myself, and will burn me out only to snag the next batch of college recruits who they can pay less than me and repeat the same cycle.

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20/09/2012 at 14:09 *Falsus* says:

Why go into making games?

Well, because you love it. Once you're over a certain threshold of making money, it won't improve your life anymore really. So why not do something you love?

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20/09/2012 at 14:36 *vedder* says:

Indeed. Though I wouldn't want to work for a huge AAA title producing company. I love working at mid-sized company creating the things I love. Sure it's sometimes hectic, sure I don't always get to go home at 17:00, and I don't get to make as much money as some of my peers with similar education levels, but in the end the work is almost always fun, creative and the final results are a blast. The most annoying part of working in the game industry is NDAs though. Not being able to talk about your work day with friends (or only in a cryptic version) is really annoying.

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20/09/2012 at 16:38 *El_Emmental* says:

Middle-sized companies disappeared years ago, you can't stay afloat (on your own, just with your games) with "a lot" of staff, you either need to be part of an empire (capable of getting enough projects and cash to keep everyone busy) or in a small company (capable of surviving through months of no new projects/money, thanks to a few contract works or a successful game).

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10.



20/09/2012 at 13:49 *The Kins* says:

Robert seems to be trying to argue that "simple" modding is dead and buried and that the mod scene is desperately trying to clone the primary games industry that spawned it. Based upon the evidence I see every day, I have to believe that he's saying this purely to make himself feel special on account of wanting to be the last of a breed that never died.

There are plenty of modern-day mods out there, actively played today, that don't have nearly a decade of work put into lovingly rendering every stone slab. Look at "Trouble in Terrorist Town" for Garry's Mod, which charmingly recasts Counter-Strike's Ts into a bumbling anarchic cross between Mafia and Cluedo. Or "Half-Life 3: Jaykin Bacon Source", which contrary to the name is about random Valve characters fart-jumping around throwing scientists and, uh, marital aids at each other while mimicking Metal Gear Solid. Hell, I haven't played "Day Z", but doesn't it use one of the default Arma 2 maps? It definitely doesn't seem to fall into the "MUST. REPLACE. EVERYTHING" trap, and people seem to like it enough.

And of course, that's ignoring the Doom community still churning away with roughly the same speed that it's always had, building bizarre experiments and copyright-ignoring flights of folly like "Turbocharged Arcade", "Foreverhood" and "Brutal Doom".

Maybe I'm jumping the gun and you'll address this sort of thing in Part 3. But as it stands, it feels like you're only looking as far as your argument allows.

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20/09/2012 at 14:03 *RobinOttens* says:

Well, the period of source modders all wanting to make the next counter strike and/or big AAA first person shooter definitely happened. I still remember as a result Half-Life 2 modding websites were dreadfully boring to follow. But I agree there were modding communities for other games all the while working on more feasible projects, and especially today the world of mods from large to small is as big as it ever was.

Robert isn't addressing all of game-modding ever, and even just focusing on FPS games it's not a complete history, but it paints a pretty good picture. Depending on where part 3 goes of course.

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20/09/2012 at 14:08 *The Kins* says:

Oh, I'm not arguing that there WASN'T huge unfeasible projects, but I am pointing out that a ton of feisty, more agile mods play freely in their bones, apparently ignored. They haven't dominated the landscape quite as much as Robert complains they have – they just turned into indie games.

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20/09/2012 at 14:08 *Misnomer* says:

DayZ does not qualify as a "mod" in my eyes nor should it using the definition in this article.

DayZ was produced by a paid developer working for the maker and publisher of the game that was modified. Holding it up as the evidence that modding as people once knew it is alive and well is a bit misleading.

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20/09/2012 at 15:58 *kyrieee* says:

He wasn't getting paid to do it until recently, it was something he did in his free time. He also got lots of help from people who don't work at Bohemia. I think it is relevant to the article because he didn't fall into the trap of trying to make a AAA game. There's nothing professional about the mod so I don't see how him being a professional is relevant.

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20/09/2012 at 16:31 *airmikee* says:

Huh? DayZ started out as a mod, written by one guy, Dean Hall, who had a full time day job working for the New Zealand Army.

The stand-alone game DayZ is being made by Bohemia with Dean Hall at the helm of the project, but this happened three years after the mod's release and popularity.

As of right now, DayZ is a mod only, that needs ArmaII and the expansion to work. How does that not qualify as a mod?

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20/09/2012 at 16:35 *Ansob* says:

DayZ requires Arma2 to run. It's a mod.

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20/09/2012 at 17:15 *PleasingFungus* says:

Robert seems to be arguing that for years, the mod scene *was* desperately trying to clone the primary games industry that spawned it. Robert is also arguing that this article is part 2 of 3 in an ongoing series.

Robert seems to have written a pretty great article, and perhaps you should be a little more patient & wait for the last part to come out before you start leaping to conclusions?

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20/09/2012 at 21:42 *Joshua Northey* says:

Really I think it is a muddled and confusing piece of work with little narrative and no apparent thesis. But I can see how opinions might differ. Just writing something that mentions many old games does not make it a sensible history.

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20/09/2012 at 17:18 *El_Emmental* says:

Simple modding might still exist (much less releases though), there's no longer the people to play these mods.

When you look at these few new mods who aren't trying to be AAA-like, you've got 5 servers during the first month, 2 the next month and 1 or 0 the third month *at best*. Singleplayer experience? No more than 10k downloads (Black Mesa is: HL1 remake + from the previous modding generation + AAA-like, thus the success).

With less people showing interest in "simple" modding, you've got less people turning into modding, and less talented people making mods (why making a mod nobody's gonna play? better make an "indie" prototype/short game for my portfolio – and if by miracle it sells well, make a few bucks here and there).

Mods could be popular in the past because the AAA sector wasn't able to cover as much ground (in terms of market visibility, type of gameplay, visual style of the experience) as today, when the social and psychological gains of playing a popular game wasn't as strong as now (in 2002, playing one of the top3 most-popular-games wasn't as reassuring nor as valued as in 2012), and when indies couldn't fill uncovered niches so easily.

-

Also, nowadays I can't run into a player and tell him "*hey, you should try this game/mod, it's pretty cool*", expecting him to be interested in it and having a good chance of playing it in the next weeks. In the early 2000s years, I easily "converted" many friends/friends-of-friends to mods and unknown games, it was natural to me.

Nowadays, I barely try to do that: players don't want to fiddle with installers/files, they prefer to play the same AAA game with their friends/e-friends and call it a day, even if they clearly see that the mod/unknown game I'm showing them is excellent and very enjoyable – the hassle of learning and being an outcast is too much to endure for them.

"Real" gamers got diluted in the ocean of "video games players" and it's now a lost cause, a real chore, to try to find them.

Gaming kids were curious of mods/unknown games a few years ago, they now ask you if you know how to pirate the latest Call of Duty or Minecraft and if it will run on their laptop, and look at you with an envious and excited eye when you mention hacks/cheats (plaguing the popular MP games). Things changed.

nb: even if I regret these years a little, other things are getting better (indies, no-DRM with gog.com, Kickstarter, etc).

-

When playing Vampire Slayer or Desert Crisis (both HL1 mods), I wasn't "missing" (much) on another major multiplayer release, there wasn't any indie title offering that experience, and they were all visible on the gaming news websites I was visiting.

Today, my Steam backlog is gargantuan, I frequently play Tribes: Ascend, Red Orchestra 2, Payday: The Heist, Natural Selection 2 and Killing Floor (= no more room for more games), the vast majority of news websites never cover mods (unless it's Day Z or Black Mesa), I have less time available, and am getting tired of the serious decline in the average player morality ("eternal september" syndrome).

-

Day Z ? It worked because of the viral marketing that miraculously happened : people made very efficient youtube videos who sold the mod like hotcakes, just like Amnesia was carried by the stream/videos of people screaming and wimping.

ArMA and zombie/survival mods exist for years, horror games are older than 3D, yet they never got that kind of hype – we're talking about more than a million players.

To "sell" (= to become popular, to be played), back in the .WADs era mods mostly had to bring something new/unexpected, during the GoldSource era mods mostly had to be original/different, nowadays they need to be marketable, because the player population changed (again).

At first gamers were exploring the possibilities of modding, then they were looking for what could be done in that possibilities "room" (= a SDK + a ragtag of young unpaid motivated developers), and now players are looking for the latest trend that (socially, and also psychologically) "matters".

-

The same happened with music or literary genres, or any element of the modern western culture: gaming reached a critical mass a few years ago, where the social significance is more important than its own cultural *quality*.

Both are more or less linked depending on various factors (very good things still have a chance, crap things will need a lot of artificially-created social value to work), but in the end the social (external socially-perceived quality) took over the inner quality.

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20/09/2012 at 18:54 *pepper* says:

Aaah Vampire Slayer, that was a little gem right there!

I remember playing pretty much anything I came across concerning HL1 mods. Remember Rocket Crowbar? Or some wacky semi futuristic mod that had years of work in it but died after a few weeks of playing (Forgot the name..)? Or the Vietnam mods (Hearts of Evil, Tour of Duty)? Or what about Firearms(?).. Aaah so many mods, whacky, established and some insane. There was this mod dedicated to killing Scientists, or fighting mages (Wizard Wars). Even a dark WWI mod called The Trenches.

I miss those days.

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11.



20/09/2012 at 13:51 *RobinOttens* says:

Cool article. I've been in some mod projects that have failed for various reasons. As you say, making a mod because you want to get out of making mods, is maybe not the best way to go about it. Or in our case, making a mod we hoped from the start would turn into a AAA full size game. It's great practice and a good way to learn about managing big projects, but it's maybe setting the bar unreasonably high. Well, unless you're the Black Mesa team and have the dedication for 8 years of development.

The world of bat-shit insane Skyrim mods and Steam Workshop, or stuff like Gary's Mod and free to play small indie games is much more reasonable.

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12.



20/09/2012 at 14:02 *hosndosn* says:

>this era of modding was tamed farmland where teenagers manufactured countless AK-47s to varying degrees of accuracy.

Oh my, so true.

[Log in to Reply](#)

13.



20/09/2012 at 14:21 *rockman29* says:

I remember the days before Half-Life 2 released. I was always obsessing over how detailed the models were that were made in the Source engine. Just getting different peeks at different angles of a M4 or a random appliance was amazing.

I didn't grow up with PC gaming during the explosions that were Doom modding and Quake modding though, so I was never able to compare those scenes to the Source scene. Thanks for the article, it was really interesting.

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14.



20/09/2012 at 14:24 *RagingLion* says:

“last large generation of self-taught game developers” – I wonder if a new generation is just emerging with the large numbers of free engines that are now out there to use and more avenues upon which to sell games. I guess most of the small indie teams that have emerged to release small games have come from experienced professionals that have broken away from larger studios (I think that’s accurate?) but I reckon there’s a load more younger guys that will be emerging soon if they aren’t already.

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21/09/2012 at 09:38 Nate says:

I think that’s part of an important point– a lot of the barriers to publishing a game have disappeared. Licensed engines that are free for non-commercial projects (or QIII source, if that floats your boat instead), Youtube marketing, and digital publishing/distribution all mean that a team that wants to make a TC doesn’t have to make a mod. They can make a stand alone game, and if it’s good enough, they can charge for it! In fact, the explosion in independent development is, in many ways, the redirection of modder efforts toward independent game creation.

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15.

20/09/2012 at 15:40 mondomau says:

Really enjoyed this piece and the last, even as someone who has only dallied in the FPS genre and whose only experience with mods is playing them. More like this please!

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16.

20/09/2012 at 15:53 pseudonymous says:

The exception that proves the rule: Minerva. All existing content used to create a single-player campaign.

Developer still got hired by Valve, though.

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17.

20/09/2012 at 16:24 Nim says:

So why did Nightshift not get a release? Seems like a great shame to me with tons of effort being sent straight to the recycle bin.

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18.

20/09/2012 at 16:29 caramelcarrot says:

Great article – I remember the Half-Life mod scene well, and was even tangentially around Nightwatch and am still friends with one of the developers. Sad that it never got a release – but it was just too unwieldy a project. Mod developers should all get a guide on software project management before they start. Small teams, fast iteration, incremental goals.

It’s not hard to make your game more fancy once you’ve got it out there with a user base, but I suppose single player games suffer more than multiplayer games since the incremental approach is more difficult if you want a totally new world (cf Black Mesa vs. Minerva) whereas multiplayer usually just have a single compelling core mechanic.

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19.

20/09/2012 at 16:55 dE says:

I’ve got a little modding story of my own. I wasn’t working on FPS Mods, so it’s slightly off topic here. Read at your own risk. But it might still be interesting for some to have a look behind the scenes of mods in another genre. I’m talking about maintaining a persistent Neverwinter Nights Server with a custom build module. There, there, I can see the sneer on some people’s faces. Surely NWN can’t be compared with FPS Modding, it’s like placing a beggar next to a king, a clash of Habitus. On one side you’ve got the professionals, those aiming for the industry. And then there’s them. The others. Like me, like I used to be, until I became burned out.

In contrast to FPS Mods, creating playable worlds was never prestigious in any way or form. There wasn’t any hope of being hired and even some of the most successfully run worlds only ever managed to attract about 40.000 unique account logins over their lifetime (that’s 40.000 copies of the game). Still in terms of work load it’s nothing to laugh at, people were creating models, you needed to concern yourselves with walkmeshes, lighting, integration into an already wobbly engine at the best of times, you had to create maps and playtest them til kingdom come. Laying out triggers, setting up carefully balanced spawns, tweaking attributes, weaving in stories and background, fluffy and stuffy things – mini events included – and the more creative worlds basically hacked away at the game mechanics.

Implementing a mana based spellcasting system in a game that was centered around the D&D Idea of prepared Spells was no small feat and required lots of scripting. Including a completely custom build crafting system based around learning and combining resources – in a game whose idea of crafting was “click uber stat you want, do a diceroll, win win”, was “fun” as well. Still, the reason I’m mentioning this isn’t for bragging. It’s to introduce a basic problem which lead to RP worlds eating themselves alive every single time.

That problem being: You were doing hard work and a lot of work. I’m pretty convinced that a lot of the stuff I did was quite close to actual MMO development. Looking at those, I notice the patterns. I see the invisible triggers, because logically, I would have placed them there. I see where and why something is bugging, because it’s really similar to issues we had. But there’s no respect for that kind of work. Remember, FPS modding is king. FPS Mods produce the shiny graphics that make people go wow. We never had those. Our work was always considered derivative and minor.

In short: There was no professional ambition to keep us going. No job opportunities and being generally laughed at by people for the “small amount of amateur work” we did. That lead to people looking for confirmation elsewhere. Target audience: The players.

With no outside source of recognition that was the only remaining way. While not everyone was out for recognition and confirmation by others, the majority was. That is

pretty much the fuel and currency of these kind of servers. Because even if a person wasn't interested in confirmation and just wanted to build great worlds, the players kept the confirmation system up and running and included everyone in it. In one way, the entire NWN modding community was suffering from a pretty hefty inferiority complex and social coping mechanisms.

It's no surprise that Roleplaying worlds turned into popularity contests. Some ideas were always more popular than others and in a world constantly re-inventing itself, evolving to the players whim, players had a pretty big say in what came next. Not everyone wants the same thing of course and quite frequently, those interests will clash. Worlds evolve to a point where every person is inter-connected in a web of contacts, placed in a field of supporters and opponents.

The way things usually played out was like this: Two contesting ideas came up by sheer fate. In a world so ripe on custom build stuff, any big change meant changing what someone else had built. Any revolutionary work would invalidate someone else's. People are attached to their ideas so they mobilized their social network. And every once in a while, this clashes hard enough for animosities to form. After all, if you remove a component, you're directly interacting with someone else's confirmation and social network. On the flipside, if you keep piling up content without aiming for coherence, you'll get a Frankenstein's Monster. It's somehow alive, it somehow magically works but by god is every single part ever in danger of falling apart at its seams.

So these worlds would form and shape, quickly rise up from all the creative ideas put into it. But with their growing age, interests started to conflict. Ideas became change and change threatened the accumulated confirmation. Before long, there will always be that one clash of interests that splits the server. One side pro this, one side pro that. Drama happens, one side leaves while burning all bridges behind them. Servers can only sustain so many of these splits. While new players will eventually come, the mod makers are burned out over time.

Curiously enough, those that left often opened up a world of their own. Those quickly rose up from all the ideas they had until they too found their one dividing idea. And like before, popularity contests began and Drama happened anew. This is what happens (well in this case at least) when you've got no professional carrot dangling in front of you to drag you on – no promise of future jobs or at least SOME form of reward. Interest in building things and the fascination for creating adventures for others can only drag one on for so long, before the constant non stop Drama and divide between people burns you out.

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20/09/2012 at 17:19 Chopper says:

Lots of good points in there; I enjoyed this comment ;)

None of it helped by the fact that 99.99% of potential team members are complete flakes.

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20.

20/09/2012 at 16:59 Chopper says:

So if you're not modding to get into the industry, then why mod? What, because you love it?

Personally, I had a fascination as a kid as to how games *worked*, which was the biggest mystery I could imagine. Coming back to gaming in my thirties, having not played a game since I was twelve and after ten years programming business systems, meant that I could finally find out, via the world of modding.

I did find out to an extent, and as a result have huge sympathy for developers, but already having a successful career meant that it was only ever going to be a hobby, and a short lived one due to the time investment needed.

I did love it, for about two years, and I'm happy with that.

Great article.

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21.

20/09/2012 at 16:59 ResonanceCascade says:

I do mod because I love it. Trying to get into the industry has barely even crossed my mind for exactly the reasons listed: the industry doesn't look too fun at the moment and I have a fine job as it is.

Still, there's something deeply rewarding about hopping into your custom HL2 map after countless hours of crafting, polishing, and, of course, reloading Hammer because it fucking crashed again.

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22.

20/09/2012 at 19:11 Plosworth says:

Re: Headshots – Outlaws was released in *March 1997* and rewarded headshots. Haw haw.

[Log in to Reply](#)



23.

20/09/2012 at 19:24 Wedge says:

Mmmm... Halflife 2 Substance and Aeons of Death are both oldschool moddy as fuck and totally awesome...

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24.

20/09/2012 at 21:44 lijenstina says:

So if you're not modding to get into the industry, then why mod? What, because you love it?

Why to live when are you going to die anyway ?

When the mod team reaches a point of where is tired of making it anymore release it, so others can finish it. Second possibility is modpacks that incorporate and balance smaller mods – for instance Soljanka for SoC with adding some new original elements to it.

I'm contributing to a big mod now and I can say that the satisfaction of making something new keeps me going on; learning how the game work, improving your skills. It's not wasted time it's learning.

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25.

21/09/2012 at 05:11 *Barackus* says:

Great read. Can't wait for the next post.

[Log in to Reply](#)



26.

21/09/2012 at 08:14 *AntonThaGreat* says:

This brought back so many memories of my Half-Life modding days. *wipes tear away*

However, I do believe that modding isn't gone. It's just evolved. These days, all the people that would be modding now, have a plethora of tools at their disposal and they are really the bulk of the Indie Developer scene. These "modders" have gotten smarter, especially with the advent of social media they can now sell their mods for a few bucks to a few thousand people. The hobby has simply evolved into a way to make some money. Before those modders were dreaming of becoming gaming devs via their modding work, these days they jump right in.

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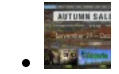
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