Charting the Forgotten Realms of Digital Vernacularity: 25 Years of D&D Infinity Engine Games Modifications

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The aim of this paper is to provide a structured overview of fan-made modifications of Infinity Engine games based on the *Dungeons&Dragons* license and utilizing its proprietary *Forgotten Realms* setting. With the ongoing resurgence in popularity of the *D&D* franchise (Sidhu & Carter, 2020) and increasing awareness of the historically contentious publishing strategies of the companies owning the franchise, Hasbro and Wizards of the Coast (Gillespie & Crouse, 2012), there is a need to address the evolving practices of mod communities focusing on the titles that arguably introduced the gamified, digital version of the popular tabletop system to the general gaming public. These titles include the *Baldur's Gate* (1998-2019) and *Icewind Dale* (2000-2019) series, among which every game except *Icewind Dale II* (Black Isle Studios, 2002) has an Enhanced Edition. By focusing on party-based, real-time-with-pause single player games I narrow down the scope of possible modding activity to experiences tailored to the needs of a solitary digital gamer wishing to simulate the otherwise intrinsically communal and social endeavor of tabletop play.

Building on the existing approaches to modding, including their typology (Welch, 2018) as well as archiving and distribution methods (Poor, 2014; Sotamaa, 2010), I will conduct a thorough survey of *Forgotten Realms* Infinity Engine games modifications hosted on the most popular community sites (e.g. Spellhold Studios, The Gibberlings Three, Sorcerer's Place). The limited scope of this research opens up the opportunity to provide an exhaustive list of fans' creations, including more obscure and controversial mods (such as *Saerileth NPC* or *Darkside Anomen*). There are three main sources of the data analyzed in this study: the gameplay content of the particular mod, its "official" paratexts (including FAQ documentation and promotional materials provided by the Author[s], if applicable), and its third-party paratexts (e.g. walkthroughs, reviews or descriptions provided outside the direct collaboration with the Author[s]). I will also make use of my own experience with IE modding and of access to the most active members of the modding community to gather additional insights and possibly hard-to-obtain data. Thus, this study will be informed by the gameplay data as well as an in-depth analysis of the supplementary content generated by the mods' Authors and fans alike. Following the general principles of the constructivist grounded theory method (Charmaz, 2014), my approach would lead to establishing key terms and recurring concepts in the analyzed material.

The goals for this project are two-fold. First of all, mapping such a long history of modifications allows to trace the longitudinal trends and changes to the content provided for and by the dedicated fanbase. With vast majority of IE games starting as adaptations of *Advanced D&D 2nd Edition* system, the changes of design approaches

and evolving rules-specific constraints in the subsequent, officially supported versions of *D&D* left their mark on the works of modders. The diverse content of the data analyzed in this study can contribute to the ongoing debates on the cultural impact of modding and the image of modders as a non-uniform group of content creators with vastly varying goals (Curtis, Oxburgh, & Briggs, 2022). Attempts at charting the diverse cultural production of the modders could also offer an insight into the communities' codes of conduct and the history of reception regarding topics associated with inclusivity and potentially sensitive themes.

Second of all, another goal of this study is to investigate the practices of preserving digital cultural memory in the context of game modifications. In this research, I follow Abigail De Kosnik's approach to the digital rogue archives (Kosnik, 2016), which pays the same importance to the curatorial work of platforms through which the files are available as to the actual content of such files. Nowadays, the *Dungeons&Dragons* franchise is governed by corporate entities that capitalize on the work of content creators and player communities. At the same time, numerous business incentives rely on the *D&D* OGL license to promote their products and effectively dominate the tabletop market – also by integrating digital tools into their gaming ecosystems (Chalk, 2022). The increasing commodification of the *D&D*-related activities (Švelch, 2022) and increased efforts to control the franchise through the means afforded by the platform capitalism resonate within the modding communities. Therefore, the broader goal of this research would be to highlight the areas of digital & vernacular resistance against the unifying vision of the *D&D* in its subsequent iterations as designed and imposed by the owners of the franchise.

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