

Mod Choreography: Transforming the Contexts of Digital Play

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EXTENDED ABSTRACT

Keywords

Modding, Minecraft, Player Generated Content, Materialities of Play

INTRODUCTION

This paper considers players in the role of game developers in the context of what might be called, ‘mod choreography’. This is the practice of curating, balancing and deploying arrangements or collections of mods or modpacks for a specific game (for example *Minecraft* or *Skyrim*). An extension of modding, skinning and other forms of content creation (Sotamaa 2005, 2010; Postigo 2010; Beggs 2012; Champion 2013; Smith et al. 2025), mod choreography is a practice that lies somewhere between mod development and gameplay with mods. In part due to the rise in the number of mods available, and in part due to a cultural desire for more diverse game experiences, mod choreography has evolved as a significant domain of modded play as players become “experience designers” experimenting with the contexts of gameplay without modding themselves. Modpack design and development is fulfilling in its own right and becomes a site of intense interaction amongst players who discuss, build and distribute them.

The task of reviewing, installing, and arranging mods is non-trivial and involves a fair degree of knowledge, skill, choice and perhaps artistry. Too many mods can make the game unplayable due to insufficient computer memory and CPU/GPU performance. Mods can also conflict with one another or be improperly made causing glitches, crashes, and other performance issues. At the same time, the orchestration of mods allows for the player to create a different experience depending on the mods that are chosen and integrated, and how they are arranged and framed. In this way, the player becomes an active curator of the game experience for themselves and for others. In some cases, the modpacks themselves are made available for download while most often mod lists are posted to forums and become subject to endless discussion and debate amongst players and modders who share their choreographed experiences.

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Perhaps more intriguing is that arrangements of mods lead to emergent forms of gameplay which could not be otherwise anticipated by developers or players since they are a confluence of disparate elements assembled by the player (Taylor 2009).

One of the largest and most prolific mod choreographic communities can be found with Minecraft players. There are over 250,000 mods available for download on the Curseforge website (www.curseforge.com/minecraft/) and more than ten thousand modpacks. The top ten modpacks share more than 100million downloads between them. They are featured by youtubers and are a focal point of conversation by industry watchers and players alike. When the different versions of the game are considered, as well as resource or texture packs and shaders, players are faced with an overwhelming range of possibilities for augmenting and transforming their play of the base game. Mod choreography arises from the necessarily skilled intervention in making sense of the proliferation of possibilities. Drawing on previous work on modding in Minecraft by Bohunicky (2013), Christiansen (2014), and Watson (2019). We will expand on the description of mod choreography through a close consideration of modpack creation, distribution and play.

Through an examination of three different modpacks, interviews and playthroughs, we will consider different dimensions of modpack creation including player motivations and design decision making, cultural economic concerns related to fair use and distribution of mods, Minecraft EULAs, and the role websites, forums and youtubers/streamers in modpack distribution. Our primary interest though is in how the active curation of mods transforms both players and play by troubling simple production/consumption dichotomies as well as notions of appropriation (Mavridou and Sloan 2013; Pitroso 2025). At the heart of modded digital play is a notion of transformation rather than consumption. Through play, players may strive to transform the (digital) conditions in which they play. We will argue that in fact, transformation of the kind that modding cultures typify are coextensive with the very idea of play as socio-material imagination (citation by author). We suggest that all play presupposes its modification. Mod choreography is a potent example of this which brackets questions of digital labour, skill and expertise, and illustrates the malleability of digital play orthogonal to the normal producer-consumer divide which defines the digital game landscape.

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