WADs, Bots and Mods: Multiplayer FPS Games as Co-creative Media

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ABSTRACT
This paper will focus on the inter-relationships between media, technology and culture as demonstrated by the online multiplayer FPS scene, and will make explicit the degree to which game texts and associated technology facilitate culture and the formation of community, and how in turn such social structures inflect and determine the development of computer games, related Internet technologies and subsequent models for software development and distribution. Beyond the idea of "participatory media", I argue that multiplayer FPS games have become "co-creative media"; neither developers nor players can be solely responsible for production of the final assemblage regarded as "the game", it requires the input of both.

Keywords
Online games, multiplayer, first-person shooter, gaming culture, co-creative media", mod scene, Quake, Half-Life, Counter-Strike, game development.

INTRODUCTION

As a new and emerging research area, computer games demand the development of new theoretical frameworks for research and analysis. In addition to the specific requirements of a new medium, the advent and rapidly rising popularity of multiplayer computer gaming creates further challenges for researchers when the text under analysis forms a locus for human interaction – structuring and mediating communication between large numbers of people, and spawning social practices and identifications within a cultural economy extending beyond the game itself. While multiplayer gaming practices develop within existing social, cultural, technological and economic structures, they are also producing significant shifts within these structures.

Here I will be discussing the innovative gaming and development practices surrounding multiplayer, first-person shooter (FPS) computer games such as *Quake III Arena* and *Half-Life Counter-Strike*. Since the mid-1990s, a large and remarkably cohesive online community has developed around these games, involving hundreds of thousands of players, with up to 100,000 FPS gamers actively playing online at any one time [5]. In addition to actual gameplay, the FPS community engages in practices of game development, criticism,

commentary, debate, information exchange, file-sharing and social organisation. Online access to open-source game development tools, the provision of venues for distribution and publicity of player-generated game content and modifications, the use of the online community in game testing, and increased communication between game development companies and players are currently shifting the boundaries between the traditional roles of media producers and consumers and changing the ways in which these games are made. Study of the practices surrounding multiplayer FPS games can provide insight into new and emerging models of media production, consumption and distribution, play, community formation and challenges to existing structures of social and economic power.

A BRIEF HISTORY OF FPS GAMES AND THE DEVELOPMENT OF COMMUNITY

The current form of the online FPS gaming culture and game development has been influenced greatly by the development, marketing and distribution methods used by the pioneers of FPS gaming, id Software. In 1992, the first FPS game, *Wolfenstein 3-D* was developed by a group of six young game designers working out of a one-bedroom loft apartment in Mesquite, Texas. *Wolfenstein 3-D* was innovative in both game design and distribution. It was the first shooting game for the PC to use a first-person point-of-view and early 3D technology to create for the player a sense of immersion in a three-dimensional space, and stood out in a gaming world populated by the platform games of Sega and Nintendo console systems. As shareware, *Wolfenstein 3-D* was distributed for free on bulletin board systems (BBS) and by floppy disk, and proliferated on network environments such as those in business and educational institutions and the (pre-World Wide Web) Internet.

In December 1993, *Wolfenstein 3-D*'s developers, now known as id Software, released *Doom*, also initially as a shareware download (15 million copies of *Doom* are estimated to have been circulated worldwide since). *Doom* was revolutionary and culturally significant in that it was multiplayer (up to four players could play via LAN, serial connection or telephone lines) and the id developers made the unprecedented move of releasing the game's source code to the public. This allowed gamers to make modified versions of the game, customising landscapes and game models, and creating new levels and even 'total conversions' – entirely new game scenarios, such as *Barney Doom* or *Star Trek Doom*. These player creations were circulated on BBSs and the Internet.

Players wrote detailed documents (text files) outlining *Doom* gameplay strategies and game programming and modification techniques, which could be downloaded from Usenet newsgroups, the Internet and IRC (Internet Relay Chat). A famous example is the 55,000-word *Doom FAQ* written by then 14-year-old student Hank Leukart. Personal and community communication between FPS gamers was made possible through Usenet and IRC.

Both multiplayer gaming and an active mod development scene continued and grew through id's subsequent titles: *Doom II* (1994), *Quake* (1996), *Quake II* (1997) and *Quake III Arena* (1999), and the development of competing FPS titles, such as *Unreal* (1998) and *Half-Life* (1999). The popularity of multiplayer FPS gaming saw the development of clans (groups of gamers who play together as a team – both in online games and at real-life LAN meetings) and a shift towards team-based games, which are now by far the most popular (eg *Half-Life Counter-Strike* (1999), *Medal of Honor Allied Assault* (2001), *Battlefield 1942* (2002).

CURRENT MANIFESTATIONS OF THE FPS GAMING COMMUNITY

Online game servers, while used primarily for gameplay, are also a social venue for gamers. Players may type messages to each other in the game, and indeed this is an important part of strategic communication, especially in team games. Players also chat, educate each other in the finer points of gameplay, and exchange abuse, jokes and information, depending on the level of seriousness of the game. It is possible to talk as much in an online FPS game as in IRC, although excessive chatter may be frowned upon, and 'spamming' (excessive text messaging) can cause a player to be silenced or 'kicked' from the game. Players may join a server game just to talk to a friend, or to invite players to another server. In-game voice communication has been made possible in recent years by ancillary programs, again developed by gamers, (such as *BattleCom*, which was later purchased by Microsoft to make *GameVoice*) and has been incorporated in some recent games such as *Tribes2*.

There are thousands of websites devoted to FPS gaming: gaming news and reviews sites (eg Blue's News http://www.bluesnews.com/), online league and game ladder sites (for both individuals and clans) such as the Online Gamers League (http://www.worldogl.com/) and BarrysWorld (http://leagues.barrysworld.net/), individual clan pages (which provide clan information and contact details for match challenges), to large multi-purpose portals such as PlanetQuake (http://www.planetquake.com/) or the Australian AusGamers site (http://www.ausgamers.com/), which are used by the community to report news, exchange information, publicise LAN meetings and online competitions, download software and files (latest patches, maps, models, skins, sounds) and provide hosting for hundreds of smaller clan and special-interest websites (AusGamers alone hosts some 2500 clan pages and claims 65,000 registered members). Many of the larger sites host discussion forums where news items, gaming and technical subjects and a wide variety of other issues may be discussed, and provide real-time chat and links to associated IRC channels.

Webpages are the public face of the game community, and provide education resources for players in gameplay strategies, tactics, etiquette, game customisation, development, and allow discussion and debate of these issues. They also allow special interest groups within the gaming community to have an online presence and voice in the community, such www.gamegirlz.com, which raises issues faced by the relatively small number of female players in the FPS scene, and general issues of gender and computer gaming.

IRC is still popular with FPS gamers, for chat, clan meetings, technical support, game and social organisation, and FTP (file transfer) access, but not as much as in its heyday when it was one of the few technologies providing real-time communication and access to FTP sites. The release of the highly anticipated first *Quake* test in February 1996 saw an IRC record set for the largest channel ever, of 1556 users on EFNet#quake – 10% of the total number of IRC users at the time [4]. In 1999 the IRC network EnterTheGame was established by members of the gaming community to offer gamers a better place to gather and chat, setup matches, and meet like-minded people on-line. Instant messaging programs (eg ICQ, Trillian) are popular for chat between individuals or small groups.

Gaming-specific communication technologies have also been developed by the FPS gaming community. One of the most notable is *GameSpy*, a server-

query utility that was developed by gamers (beginning as *QSpy* for *Quake*), facilitating player access to over 40,000 active FPS game servers worldwide, and has evolved to include buddy lists, real-time chat and file-transfer functions, and support for other game genres [12].

INFLUENCES ON COMMUNITY

It is important to note that all these online manifestations of the FPS gaming community have developed independently of game development companies. FPS game servers are run by gamers themselves who have access to suitable hardware and connections, or by internet service providers keen to attract clientele. This differs from the other popular model used for online gaming, in which the game development company administers and controls the online game servers, such as Blizzard's *Battle.net*. Web pages, discussion forums and chat venues are all run by players. Clans and competitions are organised independently, as are online gaming ladders and the majority of real-life LAN (Local Area Network) meetings. In Australia there are dozens of organised LAN gatherings held every weekend, attracting between 50 and 400 players, and in January 2003, over 1000 gamers met in Melbourne for the inaugural "Big Day In", the largest event of its kind held in the Southern Hemisphere.

Like most LAN events, QuakeCon, the large annual gaming gathering held in Mesquite Texas, and now organised in association with id Software, had its genesis in online community activities. In 1996, regular habitués of the IRC channel EFNet#quake decided to organise a real-life meeting and pilgrimage to their gaming Mecca – Mesquite, Texas, the home of id Software. Originally planned for 50 people, word spread on the internet and eventually over 150 gamers from the US and Canada (and their computers) met at a hotel convention centre outside Dallas. To the surprise of organisers, the id Software developers, curious to see this culture their games had spawned, turned up on the last day, took attendees on a tour of their offices and paid for the gamers' convention room hire [7]. Since then QuakeCon has become an annual event attended by up to 5000 players from around the world, which attracts corporate sponsorship from id Software and other game and hardware developers, and features FPS competitions with prize money totalling $US125,000 (in 2003).

Players have developed intricate rules and etiquette governing gameplay and social behaviour, based on fundamental principles of fair play and general social cooperation. Clans in particular tend to have stringent rules governing members' behaviour, both in games and in other online communication forums, and players may be suspended or expelled from their clans for transgressions of these.

Issues of cheating in multiplayer are mostly played out at the community level. While developers try to make games as cheat-proof as possible, the innovative and creative ethos of the community means that game hackers are always looking for new challenges, and players have developed cheat programs that, for example, automate aiming and firing of weapons, make walls invisible, or extend player models so they can be seen from any location in the game. The development of cheats is done much in the same spirit of other hacking and cracking activities – for the challenge and kudos. Anti-cheating programs are developed in the same way, leading to an ongoing battle of wits at a code-writing level. Major anti-cheating innovations such as *PunkBuster* have been developed by amateur programmers in the game

community, and later incorporated into official game updates (eg in *Quake III Arena* 1.32).

This sense of self governance, combined with the creative input of players, has led to a high level of involvement and investment by players in an online community that is vocal, influential, highly social and considers itself self-regulating and, to a certain degree, self-determining.

FPS gamers develop gaming identities which are used across various media. Online gaming culture, like BBS culture before it, requires the use of in-game names (or "handles" as they are sometimes called). Players frequently have a single online name that is used for games, IRC, email addresses, account names and log-ins, instant messaging programs (ICQ, Trillian), web discussion forums, and other, non-gaming sites. On IRC, which requires unique log-ins, names may be registered with Nickserv, for security and to ensure that one's chosen name is always available. Gaming names are also used in real-life gaming gatherings such as LAN meetings, where it is rare to hear players refer to each other by their given names (if they are known at all). Online names are important in tying down a concrete identity in a virtual social environment, and gamers place much value on their online reputations.

Unlike the film, television and music industries, which tend to actively discourage fans from modifying content, FPS game developers have actively encouraged the creative efforts of players. Because of early decisions made by game developers id Software to make the source code of their games and game editing tools to the public, an active "mod scene" has developed around FPS games. The mod scene is not just an additional hobby available for gamers, but an essential element of the current gaming scene. While a company might produce 10-20 models and maps for a game, those most frequently used on game servers are selected from the hundreds of player-made variations. The quality and quantity of player-generated game content often far surpasses that of the original development teams. Some of the more successful mods have gone on to be greater successes than the original game itself.

Counter-Strike (1999) – a mission-based team-play mod for Valve's *Half-Life*, which has transcended mere mod status to go on to become the most popular multiplayer FPS game of all time – was developed by British Columbia student Minh "Gooseman" Le, and became so popular it was eventually purchased by Valve and released on CD in 2000, selling over a million copies even though it has always been free and legally available for download. For over three years now, *Counter-Strike* has eclipsed every other online FPS game in popularity. There are currently over 20,000 *Counter-Strike* game servers in existence, with 60,000 to 80,000 players online at any one time, 30 times more than the numbers playing any other FPS game [5].

The success of the mod scene has led to major changes in the relationship between game developers and their audience. There is a high level of communication between gamers and 'official' developers; information regarding game development is made available to the public through .plan files and interviews, and players have an unprecedented level of feedback

and suggestion to game developers. Gaming webpages provide gamers and game developers with independent critical reviews and feedback from the

gaming community, in contrast to the more diplomatic and sometimes obsequious reviews that appear in print publications intent on promoting games and pleasing advertisers.

Developers may also participate in online discussion forums with fans, although this has become less common as the industry has grown. In the mid-90s, id Software developers would frequent the Undernet IRC #quake channel and provide information and partake in discussions about Quake's development. This open communication between the software developers and their potential market contributed to the heightened interest in *Quake* during its infancy. Gamer-developer communications now tend to be mediated through major gaming news websites – which may host moderated online chat sessions, or solicit questions from fans which are then presented to a developer in an interview. Individual developers, major ones at least, no longer give out their email addresses; some have complained of receiving thousands of emails a week from gamers and amateur mod developers [10].

The increased input of players into these games has also had a marked influence on the way these games are developed. Whereas once a game was developed to the point of a 'beta', before being released to a few select 'beta testers' who would 'bug test' the game before the final, commercial release, game 'tests' are now being released over the net at earlier stages in development, so that thousands of players around the world can test the game and provide feedback to the developers. This also allows mod authors to get an early start on their development of their add-ons to the game. Earlier unofficial alpha tests (devoid of proper player models or texture graphics) are also leaked onto the net, much to the chagrin of developers, and to the delight of gamers eager to get a glimpse of "the next big thing", regardless of quality.

In February 1996, months before the commercial release of *Quake*, id released three levels over the net to allow gamers to bug-test network play. Two days later, game hackers had not only discovered bugs, but provided patches to fix them; hundreds of patches and hacks were sent to id in the following months. Users had even figured out how to activate features in *Quake* the developers had not yet thought were functional. One id developer was quoted as saying: "The joke around here now is [that] we can let the rest of the world finish *Quake* for us" [9]. In 1999, following the release of the first official test for id's *Quake III Arena*, (the first of a planned four tests before the release of the 'Q3 Demo') id developer Graeme Devine received over 6,000 feedback emails [6].

Some level of involvement in the mod scene or other creative, gaming-related projects is common for FPS players. In an email survey I conducted in 1999 of *Quake II* players, 83% had completed some sort of creative project related to the game, from creating webpages to model and level design. Creative input is an important part of player involvement in the FPS scene, and allows players to see themselves as playing a recognised role in the games they enjoy and in the gaming culture. As *Counter-Strike* developer Gooseman explains:

> "My initial motivation [for making mods] was probably the same as anyone else involved in the mod scene. I just wanted to customize the game to fit my vision of what a game should be. First and foremost, it is MY vision. not anyone else's. I don't spend 10+ hours a week working on a mod for free just to make a mod that satisfies everyone, I make a mod that I am happy

with and if someone else happens to like it, then that's a bonus [11].

Apart from the lucky and talented few for whom participation in the mod scene is an entry into professional game development, most gamers receive no financial or professional reward for their contributions to the mod scene, but enjoy the creative challenge, recognition from the game community, and participation in an open-source, code-sharing culture, that John Perry Barlow has described as an “economy which consists almost entirely of information” [3].

Mod development is now the most common route of entry into professional game design. Access to open-source development tools and online distribution channels for completed works have allowed young, talented developers to enter the industry judged solely of the quality of their work, despite a lack of formal training and industry contacts and in spite of other obstacles such as geographical location. It is not uncommon for a game development team to have members located all over the world, communicating and exchanging work files online, and young Australian developers in particular have benefited from such arrangements.

Online communication has also had an impact on recruitment practices within the industry. David "Zoid" Kirsch, creator of the *Quake* multiplayer mod "ThreeWave Capture the Flag" (1996) sent a brief press release regarding ThreeWave CTF to the major *Quake* news sites, which caught the attention of id’s John Carmack who offered him a job creating the CTF mod for *Quake II*. "Id's hiring process was rather strange," according to Kirsch. "Honestly, there wasn't really an interview per se for getting my job. The majority of meetings were over the Internet. I only met John in person a couple of times." [2]

Amateur game development has led to greater creativity and experimentation within the industry. Whereas major game developers are constrained by marketing, censorship and strict financial considerations that affect game development, amateur mod developers are free to experiment with new ideas and release them online to gauge public response. Because online game servers may be set up by anyone with the necessary hardware and network access, and are run independently of the game industry, server administrators are free to install any games, mods, maps, or rule variations they like – according to personal preference or in response to player demand. Software companies are then able to invest in ideas that have already been tested on the market, and develop and distribute them further. Software distribution methods have also been influenced by lessons learnt from the FPS gaming scene, as companies have discovered the benefits to be gained from giving a portion of their products away for free.

While the success of the FPS scene has had major benefits regarding the evolution of computer games, gaming culture, and the online community, it is not necessarily perceived in a positive light by the game industry in general. The most profitable games for the industry are those that are largely disposable – played once and abandoned for the next [1]. The sustained longevity of a great game such as *Counter-Strike* means that gamers playing *Counter-Strike* predominantly or exclusively for years at a time are not buying many other games, and this has led to some tensions in the industry, in which community building has been seen by some as being a little too successful.

FPS GAMES AS CO-CREATIVE MEDIA

From this brief exploration of the online gaming community surrounding FPS games, it can be seen that FPS gamers have developed a highly participatory relationship with gaming media. While the concept of "participatory culture" is familiar from research into television fan communities [8], I would argue that multiplayer FPS games are "co-creative media"; neither developers nor player-creators can be solely responsible for production of the final assemblage regarded as "the game", it requires the input of both.

An FPS gamer playing online uses not only the game software and content as purchased on the CD, but also a variety of software, game content and services provided by mod makers and the wider gaming community. Some programs are originally developed in the mod scene, and then bought by game companies and released commercially. Some mod creations are made using editors that are released by game companies, others are written by modders from scratch. Some level editors have been written by modders, and then bought by a company for its own use and subsequent release to modders. Essential information regarding gameplay, development and the culture is gained through webpages, online forums and personal communication with other gamers.

For example, in order to play an online game of *Quake III Arena*, I first find a game server using a server browser called *GameSpy Arcade*. *GameSpy* developed out of *QuakeSpy*, which was originally written for *Quake* in the mid-1990s by gamer Joe Powell, and is now released as commercial software which supports over 400 online games, and allows text and voice chat, instant messaging and file transfers. The GameSpy.com site has evolved into a major gaming news and resource portal. Voice chat in *GameSpy* uses *Roger Wilco*, a communication technology originally developed by Resounding Technology, Inc., a venture-capital-backed company formed by a group of gamers. Roger Wilco has since been purchased by GameSpy Industries.

To connect to a *Quake III Arena* server I need the latest update patch for the game (currently version 1.32) which I download from the nearest local mirror at www.ausgamers.com. The AusGamers network was originally created by gamers in 1996 for the organisation of LAN events around Australia, and is now a major gaming resource portal. The *Quake III Arena* 1.32 update includes the *PunkBuster* anti-cheat software, which was developed in 2000 for use with *Half-Life* games by a team of volunteer gamers led by Tony Ray (aka Kiwwa), who later incorporated as Even Balance, Inc., and have since been contracted by major game developers to provide built-in anti-cheat functions in FPS games such as id's *Quake III Arena* and *Return to Castle Wolfenstein*, Activision's *Soldier of Fortune II*, and *America's Army*.

Playing *Quake III Arena* I may choose to play free-for-all (basic deathmatch), team deathmatch or Threewave CTF (all included in the game's official release) or any of a variety of other player-written mods, such as Urban Terror or RocketArena3. Mod development teams work independently and are self-funded, although many now accept donations via PayPal on their website. I connect to a game server, which may be run by an Internet service provider such as UQconnect or OzForces or an individual gamer with suitable resources - either way the server is run independently of the game development company. The server may be running a selection of the original *Quake III Arena* maps released by id, or any of the 1600 player-made Q3A maps currently available. My in-game avatar may wear a standard id-issued model and skin, or I may chose a model and skin from the thousands available online or use one I have made myself. I may use customised sound

files. It is likely that I will use customised config settings to optimise the game's performance and appearance to my liking. These settings I will have learned from fellow gamers in person or via webpages, and I may download an entire customised config file to adapt to my own purposes. My config may also include customised scripts to automate certain functions. These may be written by me (if I have the necessary knowledge), or copied from friends or from webpages or forums. In the course of actual gameplay I will use a variety of tactics, strategies and techniques and social gaming and communication conventions that I have learnt in the course of play and from online educational resources.

This brief description demonstrates how the player of an FPS game accesses a complex array of resources provided by both the game development industry and the wider gaming culture in the process of playing the game. In a multiplayer FPS game such as *Quake III Arena*, the "game" is not just a commercially released program that players use, but an assemblage created by a complex fusion of the creative efforts of a large number of individuals, both professional and amateur, facilitated by communication and distribution systems that have developed out of the gaming community itself. As a co-creative media form, multiplayer FPS gaming has introduced new forms of participation, which have led to the formation of community structures and practices that are changing the way inwhich these games are developed and played.

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