

Smash Mods, Smash Creativity: Nintendo, *Project M*, and Enclosure

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EXTENDED ABSTRACT

This paper emerges out of a seemingly facetious question: What would John Locke think of the Internet? Or perhaps it would be more accurate to pose the question this way – how has our understanding of property (which we largely owe to Locke) been undermined or changed now that much of what can be considered ‘property’ exists in the realm of the digital and not the analog? In response to this question, this paper discusses the practice of video game modding, particularly in relation to a mod for Nintendo’s 2008 Wii title *Super Smash Bros. Brawl* called *Project M*. This mod is selected because it exists at the intersection of two forms of what could be called player creativity – modding on the one hand, which this paper comes to refer to as a form of *iterative* play and the emergence of a competitive scene on the other, which cultivates a form of what this paper comes to call *virtuosic* play. It will be shown, in this instance, that as Nintendo encroaches on one form of creative play, it ultimately curtails the other as well.

The discussion begins with mods and modding in the broader context of participatory culture and Web 2.0. Two notable episodes of a developer’s reaction to a mod – Valve’s endorsement and purchase of *Counter Strike* (2000) and Square Enix’s infamous issuing of a cease and desist order to the team behind *Chrono Ressurrection*, a graphical overhaul of *Chrono Trigger* (1995) – are described as a way of setting two poles on a continuum. Next, the paper outlines the history of *Project M*, discussing the mod in relation to the competitive *Smash Bros.* scene and the commodification of play. It is put forth that Nintendo’s mixed reactions to the mod and indeed the competitive scene at large represent a potential mid-point on the continuum – a strategy of toleration and, eventually, interpolation. Whereas Nintendo initially ignored the competitive scene for both *Super Smash Bros. Melee* (2001) and *Project M* in a public forum (despite the fact that *Melee*’s sequel, *Super Smash Bros. Brawl* [2008] was designed specifically to not be competitive), they have recently taken a different approach.

With the return of the *Nintendo World Championship* and marketing events like the *Super Smash Bros. Invitational*, Nintendo would seem to be reaching out to the competitive *Smash* scene. Nintendo has even begun to sponsor major community-run tournaments. However his reaching out has come at a cost as *Project M* has silently been removed from any major community events. Nintendo has simultaneously capitalized on the virtuosic play of one segment of its fanbase while managing to remove much of *Project M*’s opportunities for exposure to the public eye. This history ultimately ends with the discontinuation of work on *Project M* indefinitely, but not for the reason that one might think. This paper argues that the future of creativity in games and play is at risk if the

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current model of enclosure persists, regardless of whether the ‘creativity’ involved in any way interacts with copyright law.

Keywords

Game Studies, Commodification, Copyright, Enclosure, Play, Mod, Modding, Nintendo, Super Smash Bros., Project M

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