Game Modding, Prosumerism and Neoliberal Labor Practices

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The article describes the convergence of neoliberal subjectivities and the digital labor of game modding. The entrepreneurialism associated with neoliberal subjectivities represents an extension in the critique of digital labor, a mode that allows corporations to extract more value from participatory activities. Using textual materials and interviews, this article highlights the attempts by game industries to discursively situate the activity of game modification, producing norms that energize the productivity of modders and render their labor more amenable to the circuits of accumulation. It understands these emergent subjectivities in relation to the modders' desire for professionalization, creative self-expression, and acts of resistance.

In fall 2011, Bethesda, a video game company, published *Skyrim*, the fifth installment in the *Elder Scrolls* game series. Although *Skyrim* was much anticipated for its formal game content, also eager for the game's release were members of the "modding" community, a collective of users who had demonstrated interest in the activity of modifying existing game content and sharing their alterations online. Months before the game's release, members of the community, also termed "game modders," had mobilized themselves to discuss the "mods," or game modifications, that would best enhance *Skyrim*'s gaming experience (Miozzi, 2011). In the first week after launch, more than 800 different mods were recorded within the mod distribution website Skyrim Nexus. Over subsequent months, numerous game publications would praise the creativity and expertise of *Skyrim* modders, acknowledging their ingenuity in improving the game. So great was the faith placed in this community that one reviewer proposed that the perfection of the *Skyrim* game would come about not through additional work by the company's development team but through the passionate involvement of game modders (Kuchera, 2011).

This scenario is illustrative of the growing influence and tensions of participatory cultures. The shift toward Web 2.0 altered digital environments, causing productive paradigms to be reshuffled in favor of "prosumers," a term that identifies Internet users as hybrid consumers and producers. Yet the move toward this productive schema belies a pressing concern: chiefly, the question of whether prosumerism represents a digitized version of traditional factories. As in the case of *Skyrim*, although the creative energies of mod-makers have improved the playability of the game, the modders also constituted a source of free work upon which Bethesda could capitalize. Using textual materials and interviews, this article extends the argument of digital labor, proposing that neoliberal subjectivities open modding practices to

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new intensive labor practices. By shaping the dominant discourses, capital attempts to extract ever more surplus economic value from the crowd of creative and unpaid prosumer labor, remodeling modders into ideal neoliberal prosumer labor.

Game Modding as Prosumer Labor

Broadly speaking, game modding refers to the modification of a game through user-made additions of game content. The participants of modding use their skills to alter various dimensions of the game, ranging from the typically less time-consuming changes of graphic art to the extremely time-intensive "total conversion," in which an entire overhaul of the commercial game is attempted. Historically, modding began as a form of hacking, an activity where savvy individuals pried into the code of an existing game and rework it without the company's consent. The early game hacking community was a niche ungoverned activity conducted in small groups and whose presence was relatively invisible in dominant gaming culture (Au, 2002).

In 1993, however, these practices received formal recognition in *DOOM,* a commercial game. *DOOM* was the first game that included modding within its game-play possibilities through supplementary software called the "toolkit" or "editor." These programs featured interfaces that facilitated modding for the lay user. Depending on the sophistication of the software, users could create or modify parts of the game such as levels, interfaces, graphic design, and storylines. This historic turn is often celebrated as a consequence of mutual respect. In an interview, John Carmack and John Romero, the key developers of *DOOM*, described opening modding up to the masses because they were fascinated by the creative alterations hacked through their previous game, *Wolfenstein 3D* (Kushner, 2002). Yet *DOOM* also set the tone for how all modded property was to be legally interpreted—that is, all game content made through editors would become private intellectual property of the commercial company. Although these legal terms faced some initial resistance (Lowood, 2006), this more conflictual aspect of modding history has been quickly forgotten, replaced by a rhetoric of mutual admiration among game industry professionals and modders (Coleman & Dyer-Witheford, 2007). As such, the allowances provided for modding by corporate entities also reflect an attempt to control and reshape social relations within the activity, allowing modding to more fluidly enter the folds of capitalist relations.

Today, it is increasingly common for dot-com businesses to rely upon the coordination between users and corporations for the production of economic and cultural value (Arvidsson & Peitersen, 2009). The focus on interactivity, as championed by the Web 2.0 rhetoric, created new opportunities for corporations to archive, track, and encourage user input for purposes of marketing, sales, and commodification. This allowed the culture of digital participation to splinter into two realms: existing as a source of massive creative potential and as a space where low-cost, nonunionized labor can be harnessed (Fish & Srinivasan, 2011; Kücklich, 2005). Prosumer labor, often deprived of the proprietary rights to the ownership of its work (Nieborg & van der Graaf, 2008), represents the sought-after, high-quality "free labor" of digital commerce (Terranova, 2000). As Ritzer and Jurgenson have (2010) pointed out, "In Marxian terms, while the worker produces a great deal of surplus value, the consumer who 'works' produces *nothing but surplus value*" (p. 26, emphasis in original). For this reason, Web 2.0 can be observed as heralding a "new New Economy" (Terranova, 2010, p. 155), a technology-facilitated

commerce that capitulates on a range of quotidian (e.g., the update of daily life on Twitter) and the creative (e.g., modification and creation of software) digital activities to produce surplus value at negligible cost.

Yet, even in this sense, prosumerism cannot be read as a simple extension of the traditional modes of capital accumulation. As Terranova (2000) had pointed out, digital labor is grounded on contradictory conditions where work is "simultaneously voluntarily given and unwaged, enjoyed and exploited" (p. 33). The contradictions have led to a series of debates (Banks & Deuze, 2009). Scholars have, for instance, argued that the exchange of free work for affective participation must not be dismissed as delusion on the part of prosumers (Banks & Humphreys, 2008; Caraway, 2011). Incidents in which prosumers have retaliated against corporations for reasons of exploitative treatment suggest that participants do at least have some awareness of the asymmetrical terms of their participation and can strike back when they see corporations overstepping the line (Banks & Humphreys, 2008; Green & Jenkins, 2009; Ritzer & Jurgenson, 2010).

The contradictions endemic to the analytic of labor indicate two points: First, autonomy is an important component of prosumer activities and should not be hastily overwritten. However, as Terranova (2000) initially indicated, it is equally important to emphasize that autonomy is not a necessary guarantee of nonexploitation. In this article, I examine how video game industries shape the activity of modding such that it generates more economic value for game companies. Leveraging on the soft power of discourse, game industries attempt to inculcate subjectivities that aid the fluidity by which prosumer activities can be translated into the circuits of accumulation. At the same time, this development of modding changes the experience within the activity, sparking different reactions among its participants. Resistance to these changes in labor practices, however, cannot be read uniformly among prosumers. Although prosumers can, and some doubtless do, react through traditional forms of resistance wherein participation is discontinued or spoken of negatively, resistance can also manifest tactically (de Certeau, 1984), where resistive acts are not inimical to the interests of corporations. By reading these different forces in context, I attempt to sketch a more complex picture of how relations between capitalism and prosumer labor might be understood.

Neoliberalism and Practices in Game Modding

To understand these relations, it is necessary to describe the convergence of prosumerism and neoliberal thought. Emerging around the 1970s, neoliberalism refers to an economic regime that privileges entrepreneurial and market freedoms, supports deregulation and strong property rights, and opposes state intervention in the market (Harvey, 2005). The absence of governmental regulation on the Internet, coupled with the ease by which digital materials can be marketized and appropriated as private property by corporations, renders prosumerism an extension of neoliberal environments, sites of "low wage, low tax and low regulations" (Pieterse, 2010, p. 414).

Neoliberalism, however, is not only established in economy and policy but also embedded within everyday life as common sense, a spontaneous, taken-for-granted rationality about how one's life should be managed. It leaves its mark in culture, prescribing the norms and values of behaviors in contemporary

life (Appleby, 2010). For neoliberalism, this means an emphasis on the traits of economic entrepreneurship, prudence, and self-reliance (Heelas, 2002; Rose, 1999). The enactment and encouragement of these traits in different spheres, such as life coaching (Binkley, 2011), intimate services (Hochschild, 2012), and amateur YouTube videos (Banet-Weiser, 2011), offer glimpses into the ways neoliberalism is infused in culture. For example, Binkley (2011) suggested that the shift of the self-help enterprise—from therapy, which is backward and inward looking, toward life coaching, which is forward-looking, pragmatic, and optimistic—mirrors the turn toward neoliberal thought, which places cultural purchase on individualistic empowerment and economic opportunism. Neoliberal ideology is reflected through the enactment of these practices, the rationale they embody, and the ways they translate into the broader values of the market (Brown, 2005).

The economic value of modding is well documented within the gaming industry. Since the publication of *DOOM*, the game industries have experienced many changes, including massive consolidations, huge blockbuster-style budgets on highly marketed games, and expanding vertical and horizontal layers of production. Amid these transformations, modding was often strategically addressed as a panacea to cushion some of the negative impacts of the industry changes. For example, James Allard, the team head of Microsoft Xbox, had publicly remarked that game development would increasingly turn to the "Wikipedia route" to soften some of the growing costs of game production (Borland, 2006). Besides easing costs, mods also provide opportunities for "risk-free" experimentation, allowing users to inject creativity into formulaic game genres to balance the tensions between innovation and commercial success (Kücklich, 2005). In some cases, mods also improve the profitability of games through a "long-tail" sales effect (Goodfellow, 2006). As an example, *Half-Life 2*, which was published in 2004, enjoyed strong sales for years because of an avid modding community that released new content for players to enjoy (Dyer-Witheford & de Peuter, 2009).

With this mind, an increasing number of commercial games are supported by tool kits even though producing such software requires a directed budget (Senior, 2012). When Todd Howard, the executive producer for Bethesda was asked why some companies are not making their games modifiable, he replied, "I don't understand why they don't, I think it makes your games better" (quoted in Herter, 2012 [video clip]). This belief is now largely shared by major industry players—although, critically, the impulse for the creation of "better" games itself is connected to a higher bottom line. The alignment of modding to a commercial imperative also has changed the technologies associated with modding culture. Modding tool kits are increasingly sophisticated, allowing for a broad range of advanced, time-consuming modding options. Modding is also often more integrated into the game through distributive platforms or "community websites," where mods are made easily downloadable and consumable for players.

Industry discourse, therefore, is propagated not only through advice offered by industry professionals but also found within the popular knowledges of modding communities and codified in the technical elements, the allowances of tool kits, and the infrastructures of websites that distribute mods. These discourses combine with modding to frame the norms of labor practices, creating tendencies and propensities for neoliberal labor practices—the increased contribution of time, effort, and affectivities into their craft. Although efficient labor practices are arguably less important in Web 2.0, where labor is both free and plentiful (Ritzer & Jurgenson, 2010), there is good reason to believe that the contribution of labor

would become an increasingly central part of accumulation. Capitalism exerts a never-ending demand on improvement, and labor, as well its subjectivities, is an important component of the production process (Arvidsson & Peitersen, 2009). As Braverman (1974) noted, when labor power is purchased by the capitalist, what the capitalist "buys is infinite in potential, but in its realization it is limited by the subjective state of the workers" (p. 39). The emergent neoliberal labor practices energize the productivity of prosumers, increasing the surplus value of their labor power and rendering the labor more amenable to the circuits of accumulation (Lazzarato, 1996).

In the context of the dynamic field of prosumerism, this article examines how neoliberal labor practices are encouraged, understood, and adopted by modders in the practice of game modding. It reads this phenomenon through three registers: the discourse of the industry, the instrument of the websites, and the practices of modders. Approaching this topic from these three vantage points is essential for gaining a more holistic understanding of the subjectivities inculcated in and enacted through modding labor. The study of the video game industry provides a structural view of how modding is shaped into forms of work ideal for absorption into the circuits of accumulation. The website provides an example of how these neoliberal discourses can be codified into its material structure, using techniques of ranking, ordering, and sequencing to produce a disciplinary diagram where ethics of work can be encouraged. Interviews with modders provide insight into how discourses translate into lived realities. This article uses the optic of neoliberalism to examine the continuities and discontinuities between the convergence of capitalism and prosumerism. I ask how the discourses in modding are shaped by the industry and the technological instruments, what subjectivities these produce in modders, and, ultimately, what consequence this has for our understanding of prosumer labor as an analytical category.

Method

The arguments expressed in the following sections are derived from data gathered through industry trade journals, mod distribution community websites, and interviews with modders. Publications such as *Game Developer*, *Game Industry Magazine*, and *Game Career Guide*, which address work within game industries, as well as popular video game publications such as *Gamespot* and *PC Gamer* were examined to observe how modding is represented from the industry's perspective. A number of major mod distribution websites were also analyzed. These include the Nexus network, which hosts *Skyrim*, *Dragon Age*, *Fallout 3*, and *Oblivion* mods; Bioware Social Network, which hosts *Dragon Age* mods; ModDB, which hosts a variety of mods but is most well-known for its *Half-Life 2* mods; and the Neverwinter Nights 2 Vault, which hosts *Neverwinter Nights 2* mods.

These distribution websites heavily rely on information offered by players to build a ranked system of various "top" lists. Each list—manifesting in sites such as Nexus as the "top 100 most endorsed files of all-time" or in Neverwinter Nights as the "Hall of Fame"—draws into association an amalgam of consolidated data ranging from "endorsements," "ratings," "downloads," and "views" to "date of upload" to place mods in an ordered sequence. My reading of these sites explicitly focused on these underlying algorithms with the assumption that the means of sorting, sequencing, and arranging constituted an apparatus of knowledge where discourse was made manifest materially (Hearn, 2010).

The discourse analyses of industry representations and its material manifestation in websites were used to ground the interviews conducted with modders. Twenty-six in-depth interviews were conducted with modders sourced through the mod distribution websites, including the Nexus network, Bioware Social Network, ModDB, and the Neverwinter Nights 2 Vault. The interviews were conducted as part of a larger project involving other labor issues. However, the work mentality toward which participants approached their modding activities represented the central inquiry in this project.

The discourses derived from these sources were viewed as knowledge statements, assemblages that produce a way of speaking and thinking about game modding (McHoul & Grace, 2002). The classificatory systems of websites and statements of journalists, industry representatives, and interviewees were initially read to develop a sense of the common knowledge that circulated within the community. I then sought to understand the relations between these discourses. Reading and comparing industry representations, interview data, and website observations, I sought to understand the ways these discourses correlated with and lent authority to one another (Purvis & Hunt, 1993). Here, the concept of neoliberalism was useful in revealing the "deep structure" of these knowledge statements (Hall, 1982), the core underlying assumptions that enabled different discourses to be combined and to be articulated as "truth." The findings were organized into three overarching themes: work ethics, creative self-expression, and resistance.

The Job of Modding

In 2009, an article titled "Is Modding Useful?" was published in *Game Developer Magazine*'s Game Career Guide, a publication designed to inform students and game developers about employment in the video game entertainment industry (Wallis, 2009). The author began by posing a classic dilemma: "The cardinal rule for getting a job in the game industry is to first get experience making a game. It's the big catch-22: You can't get a job without experience, and you can't get experience without a job" (p. 1). The conundrum is then resolved with a suggestion—game modding. Today, the assertion that mods could be used as resume material has become stock knowledge articulated by game industry professionals, educators, students, and modders. Students studying game design, for instance, describe themselves being routinely advised to create mods as a way of gathering capital for future employment (Ashton, 2011). Modders among the general public are also told that mods are a good way of displaying talent and that talented modders can land jobs in the game industry even when they lack proper paper qualifications. John Carmack, the game developer of *DOOM*, stated:

> I do think that at least for young and fast moving industries like the internet and game design, talent and a resume that shows you've done some things means more than a degree. I've never asked someone "do you have a degree?" It's more a matter of "what have you done?" If it's a choice between sitting in a lecture hall and taking a test or staying at home to write a game mod to prove you have some talent, then I think that can be a reasonable way to go. (quoted in Colayco, 2000, p. 16)

The suggestion of hypermobility within the game industry must be read critically against the meanings of modding work. As Ross (2008) explained, a key trait of neoliberal discourse lies in the

suggestion that individuals can be captains of their economic destinies. This alluring notion of economic empowerment, however, also implies that individuals are required to proactively economize themselves according to the dominant trends of the market. As mods shift from products of leisure into symbolic capital for employment opportunities (Lazzarato, 1996), the ethics required in making the mods needs to adjust accordingly. Ali Bordbar, an art lead and level designer, explained that, although good mods are a reflection of "how hard you can work" and can perform as signs of talent and good work ethics, bad mods can do the opposite and "end up putting their work in a bad light" (quoted in Wallis, 2009, p. 2).

The implicit suggestion is that of neoliberal self-management: to maintain an economically viable self, the responsible modder must produce high-quality mods and avoid low-quality or unfinished ones (Rose, 2000). Such was the advice issued by the Game Career Guide when a reader wrote into the "Ask the Experts" column inquiring about the professional jobs suitable for his qualifications. The letter writer mentioned that he had tried to make a mod, but it had remained unfinished due to a lack of time. The editor's reply warned, "Finish your mod. I'm even tempted to say that *not* finishing the mod at this point will look worse than if you had never done it at all" (Duffy, 2008, p. 1, emphasis in original). In an industry where demand for job positions outstrips supply, the care for the self requires the modder to carefully partake in the management of the mod, producing within the standards expected of industry professionals.

Hopes, Dreams, and Neoliberal Labor Practices

These discursive formations provide the entry point at which neoliberal labor practices can be understood. Ashton (2011) expressed that professional game design is characterized by an enterprise culture wherein individuals must conduct themselves as enterprises, economizing themselves at every turn so as to "break into" the competitive game industry. This culture represents the neoliberal subjectivity, where the individual is expected "to conduct his or her life, and that of his or her family, as a kind of enterprise, seeking to enhance and capitalize on existence itself through calculated acts and investments" (Rose, 1999, p. 144). The use of mods as bargaining chips during an encounter with an employer requires the modder to enact a stance of "responsibilization" (Rose, 2000), where high-quality mods must be produced and poor-quality mods avoided. It is easy to see how this stance of work can benefit game corporations. High-quality mods allow for the maximization of surplus value, while the avoidance of low-quality or unfinished mods minimizes waste.

At face value, this argument seems to apply only to the modders who are intent on securing employment in the game industry. Yet the interviews conducted for this study revealed that this was not the case. Since neoliberal rationalities are pervasive in the everyday, the requirement of neoliberal labor practices in modding is readily accepted as a normative cultural script that cuts across different motivational economies. Interviewees, whether intent on seeking employment within the game industries or not, expressed work ethics that mimicked the industry discourse—although to different degrees and through different rationalities.

Interviewees offered mixed responses when asked if they were modding with the intention of landing professional jobs. Broadly speaking, they could be grouped into three categories: those who had

no such intent, those who did hope to land a job, and those who weren't sure. Only a few expressed a goal to enter the industry. Interviewees who answered in this manner tended to have relevant educational qualifications and work experience. Modding, to them, represented a logical step in career advancement:

> So the goal for this mod is to get noticed by Bioware and get a contract job. Basically everything that I'm doing goes on a resume, so that when I apply at a game development company, they'll say, hey he's made games on his own for a couple of years. . . . So I'm not doing it for fun. I have fun doing this, but I'm not doing it for fun. I'm doing it because I want to do this for a living.

As this quote suggests, a serious decision to enter the game industry requires the modder to read mods differently; not only are mods to be understood as objects of leisure, they are to be constructed in ways similar to serious work. The quality of mod, therefore, was of paramount concern among this group of interviewees. These interviewees were active in submitting their mods to competitions, spent long hours modding, and built mods that were ambitious in scale. Most of them build mods in the way Charlie Cleveland, the game director of Unknown World Studios, advised: to produce something with "totally new gameplay and art" to set their mods apart from the average mod, which is "still of fairly cruddy quality and wouldn't be taken too seriously" (quoted in Wallis, 2009, pp. 2–3). The amount of time required in doing this, however, is considerable. One interviewee expressed sneaking as much free time as he could throughout the day to mod, including the four hours of his commute and two hours at home every weekday. Even doing this, his first mod took almost a year to complete.

The remaining interviewees were either undecided about their career choice or had no intention of entering the industry. The few interviewees who had no intention of getting a job in game development were either retired or held high-status jobs that they were comfortable with. Most of the interviewees, however, were undecided about their career choice. They had thought about the possibility of developing games professionally, but they did not see their modding activities in solely those terms. A common explanation was that they would consider the opportunity if it came by, but they recognized their deficiency in possessing either relevant educational qualifications or work skills. Here, modding is pragmatically acknowledged to be only one factor among many in entering a competitive industry.

According to Bauman (2010), modern life is characterized by a spirit of uncertainty, where people seize every opportunity for fear of missing the one golden chance they could "make it." The precarity and mobility of modern work conditions propagate life choices to be made based on a lottery-like mentality, where all possible acts are conducted with optimum effort to avoid a situation where one might miss out on an opportunity (Rose, 1999). Interviewees who were undecided exhibited such an approach toward modding, pairing the contradictory stances of hopeful anticipation with wary cynicism toward the chance of an opportunistic employment:

> When I found that you could create content for games that have been released, I was floored. You don't need a job to do something and build up a portfolio . . . but I'm also being a bit realistic. After working eight years in my industry, I'm not very hopeful that I will be able to work as a developer in the games industry . . . but I am just trying to

build up a portfolio so that if the opportunity does come by, it doesn't go away because I didn't have anything to present.

Such a stance keeps modders in an optimal state of productivity. As interviewees pointed out, the chance to impress is dependent on the quality of the mod. To seize the opportunity for hire, one needs to adopt a strong work ethic, approaching modding no differently than how another modder who decisively wants a career in the industry might do (Brown, 2005). For instance, interviewees explained that mods were "a measure of my dedication to getting things finished," and that unfinished mods "reflect poorly on them [the modders]. It's like: here is something I couldn't do." These beliefs echo analyst Scott Steinberg's estimate that only 1 out of 10 self-taught modders successfully lands a job in the industry. This 10%, as he emphasized, includes only the mod seen through to completion (in Duffy, 2009). The strong work ethics expressed by interviewees are, as such, the prerequisites for a game industry career.

Interviewees in the undecided group were also more likely to extend the reading of mods beyond the confines of the game industry. Mods were emphasized as symbolic capital in other settings, including employment opportunities for other computer- or art-related jobs. An interviewee, for example, intended for his mod to attract readership for his yet-unpublished book.

The rationale of economic self-advancement present in modding, however, does not reduce modding to practices of economic strategy. In fact, game modding cannot be productively thought about until we consider the contradictions it embodies—that it exists as a site of both commodification and affective participation (Terranova, 2000). As a participatory activity, modding is situated in an affective cultural space, an environment where participants can find affirmation, security, satisfaction, and joy for their creations. The economization of modding does not necessarily dull those feelings. Indeed, interviewees often emphasize their enjoyment in the craft even as they acknowledge the economic reasons involved in modding. An interviewee, for example, expressed that the desire to mod must come from a genuine love in learning the processes of modding. While he felt that that there was "nothing wrong" in using mods as a professional stepping-stone, he also noted that "the relationship must be the other way around" and that modders needed to love the craft first before they can mod well. He concluded, "The best modders are those that truly love what they do . . . then they will continuously improve themselves and get noticed [by industry professionals]."

While the incorporation of neoliberal work practices into modding followed a pragmatic line of thought, its actual process was mingled with romanticism. The same economic rationale that spurred modders to work harder also heightened their feelings of affectivity. Modders engaged in a reflexive interrogation of their emotional states, reiterating their love of the craft to justify their effort put into modding, inasmuch as this "authentic passion" is converted into capital for justification of their own employability.

Creativity and Self-Improvement

In this sense, neoliberal labor practices cannot be simply thought of as the advancement of human capital. Rather, neoliberalism forms the underlying structure that draws into proximity discourses

such as the liberal ideals of individualistic empowerment and the freedom of amateur media production to produce new meanings to the modding activity. An analysis of the articulation of creativity by different actors in modding illustrates how neoliberalism has contributed to the meanings of work and play.

Creativity, as a concept, exists between the boundaries of work and play. Creative occupations allied to the humanistic values of openness, self-management, and self-fulfillment have been idealized as contemporary sites of meaningful and rewarding careers (Hesmondhalgh, 2010). Even though a process of exploitation is veiled behind these positive aspects (Ross, 2008), such problems had not fundamentally altered these idealizations. In a society where work is defined as the route to experiencing a full and rewarding life (Heelas, 2002), the model of the "artist" employee fits into culturally relevant notions of ideal work (Ross, 2008).

Such values have carried over to the activity of game modding. By articulating creativity with a neoliberal tint, modding managed to merge neoliberal labor practices with the exercises of autonomy, maintaining an allure to modding even as the activity became more demanding on its participants. John Romero, a professional game developer, echoed many of his contemporaries when he expressed admiration for the mods created by the community: "These people are just ingenious. . . . They have figured out all the weird bitty tricks in the code that we didn't even know about" (quoted in Kushner, 2002 p. 1).

Such representations have caused the idea of creativity to become deeply entrenched within the ethos of the activity. When interviewees were asked why they engaged in modding, all of them alluded, at some point or another, to notions of creativity. As one interviewee explained, "Creative self-expression can be an essential human need. . . . We [modders] have that sort of motivation but I'm not sure I can rationalize it. It's just something I have a compulsion to do." This identification with creativity I argue, is not accidental. Even though modding itself might be creative, the language employed here speaks also of the modders' intention to align their acts to the dominant narratives of a rewarding life constructed through an ethical juxtaposition of work and play.

The understanding of this point may begin from a common comparison between modding and television viewing. When interviewees rationalized the long hours they devoted to modding, many of them mentioned the other unproductive leisure activities that they could be doing in lieu of those hours: "You know, some people go home, they sit down and watch the television." This creative self-expression is productive not just because it results in an immaterial commodity but also because of its possibility for self-improvement. When interviewees were asked why modding was productive, they typically pointed to its challenges and the skills they needed to acquire to overcome them. For instance, a student interviewee expressed how modding ties into his academic skills, "You learn things 10 times faster than you do in school. I'm learning a lot more in mathematics here than in school and that keeps me ahead of my peers."

In a neoliberal era when value is indicted by the market system, game modding, which fulfills both the conditions of leisure and self-improvement, is perceived to be a "superior" leisure activity. When articulated as creative self-expression, modding is attached to the notions of pleasure and play. However, the productive element within creativity also opens this pleasure to inflections of rationalization wherein

modding can be brought into an economics of leisure. Creative self-expression becomes not only an end in itself but a means for utility in leisure, a route to ensure fuller, better lives (Heelas, 2002). In doing so, leisure here is brought into the realm of self-management where individuals are encouraged to judiciously select so that their labor potentials can be maximized and reproduced in ways that are most efficient (Cohen, 2009). Creative expression, therefore, offers a language in which leisure time can be used productively to conduct "work on the self," improving one's marketability even as a fulfilling life is being wooed (Heelas, 2002).

Neoliberal Transitions Within Resistance

This section turns to the concept of resistance to understand the conflictual and shifting meanings of modding labor. Analysis of the interviews revealed that changes in labor practices had been met with resistance, but the forms of resistance were varied and do not all challenge the interests of corporations. Only one interviewee had directed resistance toward the commodification of modding. With 10 years of modding experience, this interviewee expressed that there is an increasing "pressure in making mods commercially viable." Feeling frustrated by these changes, he had resolved to discontinue his participation in modding.

Most interviewees, however, demonstrated resistance toward a different issue: the straightforward algorithmic mechanisms by which mods are evaluated on mod distribution websites. This dominant form of resistance, I argue, is representative of the ideological reaches of neoliberalism. Here, the struggle for control occurs not against commodification but autonomy within commodification; that is, a preservation for control over how the self is economized through software-enabled mechanisms of visibility and interactivity that lie outside the direct purview of modders.

Algorithmic mechanisms of evaluation have become commonplace in the major hosts of game mods, such as the Nexus Network, ModDB, Bioware Social Network, and Neverwinter Nights 2 Vault. These websites use mechanisms to solicit feedback about mod quality from users. Such feedback often comes in fuss-free quantitative options: ratings or a simple "recommend" selection. By consolidating such feedback through numerical calculations, algorithms can classify and sequence mods into ranks to indicate their comparative popularity and quality. As Tim Edwards (2012), the editor of *PC Gamer*, pointed out, these mechanisms provide an efficient and democratic route for the community to self-govern: "Creations are rated, tagged and filtered via the community; ensuring that the best rises to the top. . . . Games get better. Everyone wins" (p. 1).

This view, however, cloaks the fact that such algorithms are constitutive of power relations (Beer, 2009). By using feedback to provide a quantifiable and manageable estimate of the mods' economic values, these apparatuses also represent the material manifestation of neoliberal discourses (Hearn, 2010). Whether modders desired it or not, such mechanisms have become imposed upon them as the dominant mode in which modding ability and work ethics are communicated.

Yet creating a good mod is insufficient to guaranteeing success within these evaluative mechanisms. Although the statistical calculations underlying ranks and evaluations are commonly

interpreted by players as honest and objective expressions of mod quality, the statistics are, in reality, influenced by various factors. Interviewees feared that imperfections of a system would cause an undervaluation of the "true" quality of their mods, damaging a reputation that they had put much effort into building and preserving. This had led to some frustrating experiences among interviewees:

> Some players think that if the mod is not popular, the mod isn't good. And that's something that annoys me. If you say that your mods are found on page seven or eight [of the listings in the site], they say, "Your mod is terrible."

To overcome the potential problems of the mechanisms, interviewees engaged in the labor practices of marketing and customer relations management. These terms describe the disciplines from which such knowledge and practices are drawn. Interviewees explained that marketing requires one to "think of your mod as a product" and publicize it such that "people would come and search for your mod through all the other hundreds of mods out there." Customer relations management involves "winning the hearts and minds" of users, using one's "emotional intelligence" to provide a "warm caring environment in which players feel comfortable."

Through marketing and customer relations management, individuals were better able to control the commodification of their mods and reputations. These practices allowed modders to guide and shape the evaluations of their mods after they were released. In doing so, modders resist the straightforward belief that a mod's success no longer lies within their control after their publication. However, these same practices that provide feelings of autonomy are themselves constitutive of neoliberal labor. An interviewee stated,

> It is nice if websites can have features that can help mods get attention, but in the end, you have to take responsibility for that. In the same way you have to take responsibility for the mod, you have to take responsibility for everything else about it.

The economization of the self, therefore, extends beyond the creation of the mod itself to include its "package," the affective labor of marketing and customer relations management, to ensure the optimal performance of the mod (Hearn, 2010; Rose, 1999).

Labor in Resistance

The labor involved here is not slight. Marketing requires significant mental exertion as modders create and update blogs, websites, and trailers to garner attention for their mods. This affective labor stirs excitement so that users will be tempted to play the mods and, possibly, rate or recommend it. An interviewee explained,

> I created a website for my mod. I have a blog that I update every day. I created trailers even before my game came out. So when it did come out, a lot of people downloaded it and I got a lot of votes.

As this quote suggests, marketing work is not intended to directly subvert the logic of evaluative mechanisms. Rather, it constitutes a form of tactical resistance, submitting to it while taking steps to ensure that conditions are present where the mod can be best represented.

Customer relations management buttresses these efforts by applying linguistic skills to constructing what some interviewees call a "professional image," where one's response to player feedback demonstrates suitable tact and concern. Interviewees suggest that modders should demonstrate considerate thought and never "barrel someone over" just because their suggestions are absurd. In dealing with queries, they need to be "patient and friendly," trying their best to help. In receiving criticism, one needs to be "humble and open," listening to the comments without prejudice and admitting shortcomings if they are valid. Both practices, therefore, draw upon culturally relevant notions of brand management so that positive evaluations can be gathered for the mods.

However, if such positive evaluations are to be ensured, such practices must also be undertaken with a keen sense of the norms of the community. Modding, accepted by its participants to be an affective activity, is averse to the singular goal of commodification. As such, the economization that occurs through marketing and customer relations management requires careful construction, adhering to the moral codes that dictate the boundaries of acceptable behaviors of the community. For instance, interviewees explained that marketing efforts must not be "blatant or too direct," or they risk backfiring on the modders and "cause others to question their integrity." The best marketing efforts are those that lean toward genuine care and sincere helpfulness while promoting one's own mod. An interviewee, for instance, conducted strategized marketing by helping others with their queries and then leaving a hyperlink to his mod within his signature, hoping that that would lead to some publicity. He explained:

> I would go to the scripting forum like every 15, 30 minutes or so because a lot of people used to have questions related to the tools. So I made sure that I was responding to the things that were talked about. Then they can see the links to my blog, in my profile, in my signature and in my replies.

Customer relations management is subject to these same norms. Interviewees described having to deal with players who were rude and insulting. Not surprisingly, when faced with such abuse, they felt a mixture of negative emotive states. An interviewee, for instance, described experiencing a "very strong instant flare up" when he interacts with a particular player who continues to be disrespectful despite being repeatedly offered help. These occasions tempt him to respond harshly, "almost pointedly insulting the person who chooses to write that." Yet such verbal assaults seldom take place. Instead modders engage in strategized emotional control to withhold the immediate expression of their negative feelings and present themselves in positive ways that they might not feel. An interviewee explained:

> I felt like they were attacking me but it felt like I cannot be aggressive because, as a modder, it does come down to the word of mouth from others. If I treat them rudely, others will see it and may jump to conclusions. It runs the risk of damaging a reputation that I've strived long to build.

As this quote indicates, it is not so much the interaction with specific players that interviewees were concerned about; rather, it is about how that exchange would look to the larger public. In other words, interviewees worried that negative remarks used against players would transgress community norms and reflect negatively on themselves. With these examples, it becomes possible to see how customer relations management represents a form of emotional labor (Hochschild, 1983) where one's own emotions are controlled to serve the needs of others.

The pervasiveness of displays of neoliberal subjectivities in modding labor, however, contains its own possibilities for different targets of resistance. In particular, the increased emphasis on marketing and customer relations management labor brought forth unhappiness among modders. An interviewee, for instance, said that, "Sometimes you feel like you need a whole advertising team to get the mod out there. You got to be working twice as hard!" It is to this point that the blurring boundary between work and leisure seems to be stretched to its limit. As the auxiliary labor requirements increase, the psychological feelings of pleasure in modding taper off and the sphere of work becomes more transparent to the modders. Interviewees acknowledged this issue, and some of them pondered the viability of modding in the future:

> I think of all that [marketing] all day long at work . . . I'm not going to think about this in a fun activity but because the logic of how some things are changing in modding you do have to think about those things, because if you don't, then possibly your work would be neglected and not appreciated. It would seem that modding has become really a lot more like work over time. . . . And I wonder if this keeps up if I would even continue.

The possibility, however, that modders would gather collectively and attempt to reshape the activity is remote. Meanwhile, marketing and customer relations management continues to be a form of resistance that benefits the interests of corporations and places modders in particularly precarious situations. As the interviews revealed, the self-burden of reputation improvement and preservation creates a condition in which the modders' own physical and emotional well-being is placed at risk. Consistent and significant amounts of time must be directed toward blog updates or forum replies, and negative emotions, if experienced by the modders, must be controlled and dealt with for performing effective affective labor. As Edwards (2012) explained, the affective labor of modders remains normatively expected by the public, and the development of further interactive options for comments and responses increases the need for such labor. "Comments threads help creators respond to their subscribers. Community creators get to help players by picking collections and themes" (p. 1). Such work is commodified by corporations, constituting free labor where hype can be built for commercial games, and where the work of emotional labor can be offloaded to the self-governing modding community.

Conclusion

As the format of Web 2.0 becomes adopted in more contexts, the need to engage critically with labor within prosumerism becomes more urgent. Critics have rightly pointed out the need to attend to the contradictions of the process, examining the resistance and the meanings prosumers attach to their activities. I argue that this needs to be taken further—if prosumerism is to be understood as a dynamic

cultural terrain, then we need to analyze the battle for control as occurring from different directions. This article has asserted that game modding labor is not a historically static entity. Rather, responding to historically situated discourses and technological apparatuses, different subjectivities and practices emerge. While mods could have political potential, bringing into contest intellectual property rights (Postigo, 2008) or highlighting issues of social significance (Sotamaa, 2007), my analysis demonstrates that modding can also enact subjectivities that serve the interests of corporations, energizing labor power of modders and rendering the activity more amenable to the circuits of accumulation. This situation, I believe, is unlikely to be solely confined within game modding. Neoliberal governmentality is pervasive (Brown, 2005; Rose, 1999), and the adaptation of such rationality and the performance of related labor extend indefinitely to other areas of prosumerism as well.

When neoliberal citizenship is in place, what counts as resistance and meaning can no longer be so easily determined. As Beer (2009) pointed out, even the power relations organized by technology have become increasingly invisible. When a prosumer is made dominantly to be an economic actor and is supported by institutional rewards to find meaning in the performance of both labor and resistance to acquire the title of "top modder," what exactly can be said about these concepts?

My essay highlights the need to reengage with concepts of labor, resistance, and meaning to express one another's complexity and incomplete totalities. Ideally, this would entail a recuperation what Brown (2005) described as an "alternative vision of the good . . . in which justice would not center upon maximizing individual wealth or rights but on developing and enhancing the capacity of citizens to share power and hence, collaboratively govern themselves" (p. 59). The goal here is to consider how neoliberalism both restricts and enables the achievement of these ideals. For prosumerism, the challenge lies in recovering what its ideals are and to find alternative ways these ideals can be expressed and shared through revisions of its current model of distribution, exhibition, and evaluation.

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