



MALMÖ UNIVERSITY

Modders in the Digital Game Industry

A study on modders' perceptions on corporate commodification of free labor

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Abstract

The aim of this thesis is to investigate modders' perspectives on corporate strategies of commodification towards their free labor and how this changes their perception of their relationship with corporate actors in the digital game industry. The thesis is based on semi-structured interviews of modders associated with the modding forum Nexusmods.com. The result of this study is an observation of modders existence within a participatory ecosystem constituting of the modder, the community and corporate actors, that act in ways towards each other directly or indirectly shaping the conditions for participation. By adopting Sayer's concept and Carpentier's understanding of participation I have elicited norms, values, and social code to constitute of a moral economy of respect towards craftsmanship and ownership, at the same time it is expected of creators that their intention is to share and enrich the knowledge community with their creations. And how these norms, values, and social codes determine modders perception of corporate strategies of support, integration, as well as, limitation and control.

Keywords: Free labor, Modders, Commodification, Strategies, Corporate Actors, Moral Economy, Digital Games, Participation, Knowledge Community

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List of Abbreviations

UGC – User Generated Content

UCC – User Created Content

DLC – Downloadable Content

IP – Intellectual Property

EULA – End User License Agreement

MTX – Microtransactions

NDA – Non-Disclosure Agreement

1. Introduction

In recent years, corporate actors have adopted new approaches of value extraction towards the free labor forces within the digital game industry. In the digital game industry, there exists a developmental play between publishers and studios, wherein studios are contracted to develop projects based on publisher-owned concepts or develop projects that the studio attempts to sell to the publisher (Kerr, 2006, p. 64). This has been the conventional understanding of the game industry creating products of intellectual property (IP), however, in the last two decades, the digital game industry has experienced a mobilization of immaterial labor (Dyer-Witheford & De Peuter, 2009, p. 23). Lazzarato defines immaterial labor consisting of two different aspects of labor, the first being the increasing use of information content as in “skills involving cybernetics and computer control” and the second being “the activity that produces the “cultural content” of the commodity, immaterial labor involves a series of activities that are not normally recognized as “work”” (Lazzarato, 1996, p. 133) for its missing physical effort.

The mobilization of immaterial labor in the digital game industry, is a combination of cultural and technological forces (Dyer-Witheford & De Peuter, 2009, p. 25). Cultural, in that there is a wish for creating content, as well as a demand for this content. Technological, in that the amount of content created increased significantly when game publishers made toolkits and game engines available. This content is often referred to as modifications or mods.

Modding, for modifying, is an umbrella term describing a form of skill demanding user-created content (UCC), where the user engages in game content creation. This content creation can be anything from slight changes in how the virtual world is presented, to complete conversions that rend the game anew with surroundings, narrative, and characters (Postigo, 2007, p. 301). More specifically these changes are redesigns of textual codes that often times maintain the structural base coding but provide a new visual context. These textual changes are often referred to as either *mapping*, which maintains the characters and the story line of the game but puts it within a different virtual world. Or *skins*, which are alterations made to the character or objects of the game, making them appear partly or completely different (Ibidem).

Referring to this type of UCC as mods, or modifications suggests that it is a permanent action of altering or adding additions to the game. However, this is not the case, as mods are additional content that the player can install and, often, enable or disable whenever needed. Therefore, it does not permanently change the game in that sense.

Postigo's (2007) research on fan-based digital game modifications in broad terms conclude on a certain symbiosis existing between the game industry and the modders producing add-ons. Postigo explains the motivation for modders to produce content, to be social in terms of artistic endeavor, community commitment, increasing the personal joy of playing the game by “taking” ownership, or personal identification by adding new cultural narratives (Ibid, p. 309). In addition, Postigo also concludes, that there are multiple potential gains for companies who embrace the fan groups. This symbiosis invites us to turn the focus away from the game companies, as the sole innovators within the digital game industry, and instead towards the collaborative audience within. What makes this

type of audience participation interesting is how this symbiosis “minimizes differences between artist and audience and turns the text into an event” (Fiske, 1992, p. 40). By event Fiske refers to the text becoming an object of possession for fans, as they are adequately passionate and devoted to it.

As modding and “fan possessions” became an integrated part of the digital game culture and industry, controversial content also started to roam the mod distribution webpages (Kerr, 2006, p. 121 & 122). Such as, the Jas’ Marriage Mod, which is a mod for the indie farming simulation game *Stardew Valley*, developed by Eric Barone. The mod expands wedding options of the players character with the non-player character (NPC) Jas, a girl of 10 or 11 (Grayson, 2018); or, the Hot Coffee mod for the action-adventure game *Grand Theft Auto: San Andreas*, developed by Patrick Wildenborg. The mod bypassed obstacles that prevented players from viewing or participating in sexual acts, forcing Rockstar Games to change the rating of the game content from Mature to Adults Only 18+ (Parkin, 2012); as well as, the In *Grand Theft Auto: Online* mod, where players reported experiencing forced sexual assault of their avatars by other online players. These assaults were possible through mod-hacks that enabled control over other players characters (Hernandez, 2014). Modders were not only authors of inappropriate content, sometimes they also created political content, such as anti-war virtual posters for *The Sims* and, as well as anti-war graffiti for *Counter-Strike*, called *Velvet-Strike* (Kerr, 2006, p. 123). This loss of control on the corporate actors’ side, alongside the realization of economic benefits in using pre-existing intellectual properties (IPs), resulted in increasing licensing of IPs, and as such, an increasing awareness around protecting these IPs with end-user license agreements (EULAs) for users buying digital games (Kerr, 2006, p. 70). This effectively limited the freedom and flow of UCC, as modders were now partly to outright restricted from making changes to the game code.

In this context, the digital game industry is now being increasingly obvious in embracing new and innovative strategies of effectively re-incorporating this type of UCC as an opt-in extension service for other users to buy. By for example, limiting modding to a few IP’s (Cowley, 2015), or offering free engines like Epic Games’ Unreal Engine until the user earns a certain amount of revenue on potentially developed titles with said engine (Postigo, 2010, p. 10), or by creating corporate platforms and webpages catering towards the modding communities, wherein the users upload their work for the company’s IP’s, wherefrom the company can chose and pick, and eventually arrange paid agreement with selected amateur creators; this is the case of Bethesda’s Creation Club (Avard, 2017). These strategies suggest a relationship between modders and corporate actors, that is primarily defined by the studio/publisher from an economic standpoint. In other cases, monetary flows play no role, such as when Fatshark support modding, by adopting Bethesda’s Creation Club strategy, but instead of having a payment arrangement Fatshark credit the selected creators (Hagblom, 2018). As a result, some strategies are met with contempt within the gaming and modding community which illustrates a relationship of increasing tension (See, for example, Pearce, 2017; Rad & Saris, 2015), while others are met with respect and delight.

When referring to digital games, I consider the computer platform primarily, but not exclusively. While modders produce most of their content for computer games, corporations have realized the value of this type of UCC and are therefore turning focus towards making other platforms compatible

with this type of content production. Therefore, when I refer to digital games, I consider the computer platform primarily, but the results of this study will arguably encompass more platforms at a later time, when UCC friendly platforms have been adopted more broadly, on for example console (PlayStation, Xbox, and Nintendo Switch), Tablets, and Smartphones. Alpha Kerr also identifies the term *digital games* to be a suitable concept embracing the broad field of games, as opposed to computer games or video games (Kerr, 2006, p. 3). Furthermore, it is distinctive from other types of games that have nothing to do with digital and it also helps to encompass the broader ludic objects or texts that provide outputs that are not exclusive to the visual, e.g. audio and controller vibrations.

1.2. Background

In this section, I will briefly touch upon the technological, and the economic development of the digital game industry, in order to place modders in a broader context of media history, production, and use. I introduce this background by raising other scholars' appraisal of UGC and UCC, and later concern for this, due to the emerging economic exploitation and precarious conditions. Then I will make a step back, by outlining the history of the digital games and modders role in this history. Lastly, I will return to the scholarly appraisal of UGC and UCC, by placing modders and the digital game economy within the context of the general debate. Sam Hinton and Larissa Hjorth defines the distinction between UGC and UCC as

“[p]articipation [that] can take various forms of agency from user generated content (UGC), in which users forward content made by others, to user created content (UCC), in which the content is made by the user. Every time we participate we partake in various forms of labour sharing – from creative and social to emotional and affective labour” (2013, p. 55)

In 2006, multiple scholars cited the Time magazine nomination of ‘You’ as the person of the year (Van Dijck, 2009; Benkler, 2006; Banks & Humphreys, 2008; Banks & Deuze, 2009). Scholars appraised these new media technologies and their audiences for the effects of “democratizing knowledge, creating online spaces of access for independent experiments with creativity, and remixing” (Velkova, 2016a, p. 2). This appraisal stirred a scholarly debate criticizing this celebration to be neglecting conditions of the unwaged labor in the growing digital economy (Terranova, 2013). As well as suppressing an important critical debate around the functions of the gift-economy,¹ its beneficiaries and how they do it (Velkova, 2016a, p. 2). At its peak, scholars are castigated for boarding a bandwagon effect for their enthusiasm for UGC and UCC (Hesmondhalgh, 2010, p. 268). Tiziana Terranova describes this development as the process which is

“usually considered the end of particular cultural formation. (...) [L]ocal cultures are picked up and distributed globally, thus contributing to cultural hybridization or cultural imperialism. (...) Incorporation is not about capital descending on authentic culture but a more immanent process of channeling collective labor (even as cultural labor) into

¹ Also referred to as sharing economy

monetary flows and its structuration within capitalist business practices.”
(2013, p. 38)

This citation illustrates how the creative industries capitalize on free labor, which can be understood as an argumentation for the precariat conditions of the digital media economy. This focus on the exploitative nature has been criticized by other scholars to be undermining other forms of capital matter that benefits well rounded human beings as well as neglecting the agency to quit the practices that are being exploited (Baym & Burnett, 2009, p. 446). In addition, the overemphasis on these conditions of precarious labor neglects the “dynamic and co-evolving relationship between the cultural and the economic” (Banks, 2009, p. 78).

1.2.1. The History of Digital Games & Modders

Modders take part in a bigger shift from traditional labor to immaterial labor, in the twenty-first century. The conventional understanding of work as an occupation primarily about material production, changed as labor became increasingly immaterial with the introduction of the internet, and media industries such as music, film, and digital games. - A shift from concentrated material labor in the factories, to increased interest towards the immaterial labor on the network (Dyer-Witford & de Peuter, 2009, p. 4-6). One of the first cases of immaterial labor, directly related to modding, was the digital game *Spacewar* created in 1961 by Steve Russel who was a computer scientist working for U.S. military-industrial complex, creating simulations for nuclear strategies (Postigo, 2003, p. 594). *Spacewar* can in this sense be considered a modification for one of these simulations, modified into a game rather than a digital simulation. *Spacewar* became a collaborative media project (Löwgren & Reimer, 2013), as it was subject to multiple modifications and changes by different people who accessed the game through the internet’s forerunner and military-owned APPANET (Dyer-Witford & de Peuter, 2009, p. 8-9). Some of these modifications were political, or anti-establishmentarianism, with programmed letters supporting strikes against the Vietnam war, as well as people coordinating demonstrations through the game (Ibid, p. 9). Due to the US military industry’s exclusive access to the early technologies and internet access, hacking was a necessity to gain access for outside people, and thus the modding culture received a negative connotation (Sotamaa, 2010, p. 240).

Spacewar became the inspiration for the creation of the Atari arcade machine. The founder, Nolan Bushnell re-created a version to run on the arcade machine, effectively commodifying *Spacewar* by merging it with the popular concept of slot machines in 1971 (Ibid, p. 11 & Manovich, 2010, p. 253). This combined with other inspired projects, Atari quickly became the main digital game creator in the world.

After the video game crash of 1983, there was a moment of doubt as to whether the console industry could be saved. But in 1985 the Japanese trio Nintendo, Sage, and Sony with their cultural addition of *Manga* to the game repertoire, effectively gave rebirth to the console industry (Ibid, p. 14-18).

Meanwhile, in the 1990s the growing presence of the computer, especially after the introduction of the Commodore 64, resulted in the immaterial labor splitting up into two factions. While the console market was receptive towards the Asian manga culture for innovative ideas, the digital computer

market was subject to most hacking, or modding activities that catapulted the digital computer game industry. For the computer, it started with *Tetris*, created in 1984 by Alexey Pajitnov, an employee at the Soviet Academy of Sciences. In the western world, Alexey's idea was discovered, and the discoverer saw his/her chance to claim the "rights" to it, within the capitalistic system and copyrighted IP in the western world, for then to sell it on to Robert Maxwell.

In the 1990s, Alexey started to receive the recognition of being the original creator of Tetris, and inspired youths to achieve the same celebrity status. This culture of modders became a source of innovative ideas to corporate actors of that time. One of the actors were Id Software, who introduced the first first-person shooter games: *Castle Wolfenstein*, *Doom*, and *Quake*. All three titles were modified extensively by the modding community. The program code of Castle Wolfenstein was altered to create a completely new game *Castle Smurfenstein*. Later when Doom released in 1993, the modding community also changed this game, by adding an editing tool within the game, which effectively permitted players, without sophisticated coding capabilities, to apply their creativity and create new maps, levels or scenarios that could be shared on the internet (Joseph, 2018, p. 695). Id Software took this chance to monitor the community creations and offer job positions for creators who stood out.

The peak in the history of modding within the digital game industry was when Minh Le created the *Counter-Strike* mod in 2000, a team-based terrorist/anti-terrorist first-person shooter, for Valve's game *Half-Life*. Counter-Strike became the worlds most played digital game at the time, and as such the mod was effectively a bigger success than the game it was created for. Minh went to work for Valve, and Valve bought the rights to the Counter-Strike IP (ibidem.).

Counter-Strike became a testimony to the flow of innovative ideas and benefits from adopting an 'open source' approach to game development. Minh Le as talented and creative as he was, took part in a bigger cultural shift in the modding community, which was enabled by the technological improvements in the digital game industry. With the introduction of the first-person shooters Doom and Quake, Id Software, at a later point, also officially introduced the game engine or editor, referred to as id Tech 1 & 2 respectively. The game editor facilitated new forms of user creative production, while also making it widely accessible as the editor is included whenever a user buys the game. So, this was a direct encouragement from the publisher, for users to modify, add or change the game design (Dovey & Kennedy, 2011, p. 14).

In a way, the game engine normalized what was previously considered hacking the game code and modifying or altering it. As such user-created game levels and retextures became widely available for anyone to download and use, in other words:

Here was a new cultural economy that transcended the usual relationship between producers and consumers or between "strategies" and "tactics" (de Certeau): *The producers define the basic structure of an object, and release a few examples as well as tools to allow consumers to build their own versions, to be shared with other consumers* (Manovich, 2010, p. 245)

This was initially intended as a part of the ‘open software’ movement by its creators John Carmack & John Romero (Lowood, 2014, p. 188). While Manovich perceives the new cultural economy to be enabled by the game editor, Dovey & Kennedy argue for the player production within player communities, as the enablers of games functioning as prototypical of new media economies, drawing on Sue Morris (2003): “developers nor player creators can be solely responsible for production of the final assemblage regarded as the ‘the game’, it requires input from both” (Dovey & Kennedy, 2006, p. 123).

This open software intention since the release game engine has become increasingly important to the global game industry (Hong & Chen, 2013, p. 292) and became a significant source of profit for studios. Bethesda, Valve, Riot Games and, Blizzard were some of the first studios to thrive heavily on mods, as they either attracted the biggest modding community², or discovered and hired modders who showed creativity, technical skill, and were knowledgeable about the wishes of the gaming community.³ In fact, id Software, Epic Games and Rockstar have been encouraging this type of UCC by putting up websites as facilitators of this social production, as well as competitions to showcase and encourage for other modders (Kerr, 2006, p. 121). Therefore, adopting this business strategy became crucial for gaining an advantage in the game industry of the 1990s and 2000s (Scacchi, 2011, p. 70).

As studios and publishers experimented with this business strategy in the new cultural economy, it quickly became evident that the free labor force was not so easily tamed. The case is, some modders hack the closed-off elements of game systems to experience the full potential of the game, which goes against the EULA. EULA’s are studios and publishers’ attempt to confine the modders to specific areas of creative alterations and modifications of the game, or completely prohibit user created mods (Scacchi, 2011, p. 67). In the massive multiplayer online game *World of Warcraft*, the EULA only permits mods that change the user interface or work as add-ons, which means the mods were not permitted to make changes to game mechanics or appearances (ibidem). Yet, breach of EULA has happened, causing significant problems to the studio or publisher of the game. Therefore, while mods can help in improving game software sales, it can also have a negative effect on companies’ in terms of intellectual property (Postigo, 2008, p. 61).

As a result, game studios and publishers have decreased their encouragement for modding or confined it to specific environments of control to assure that modding does not become a problem of studio/publisher being associated with controversial content created by modders, which has happened in the film industry (Tushnet, 2017, p. 79) or become competition (Dovey & Kenndy, 2006, p. 134).

This subchapter has briefly introduced the history of modders in the digital game industry, which, besides from illustrating a historically changing relationship between users and producers, also

² This was the case with Blizzard and their release of *Warcraft 3: Reign of Chaos* in 2003. With the including world editor many different game modes appeared from UCC creativity. One of the most reknown is the mod *Dota*, created in a collaboration and sequence between modders such as Kyle Sommer, Steve Feak, Steve Mescon, and lastly Abdul “Icefrog” Ismail. Bethesda is also reknown for its big and persisting modding community of their game series *The Elder Scrolls*.

³ This was the case of Valve and Riot Games. Valve hired Abdul Ismail to create *Dota 2*, and Riot Games hired Steve Feak and Steve Mescon to develop *League of Legends*.

illustrate the broader research areas that the study on modders taps into. The history of modders can be divided into three epochs; the first being characteristic for the hacker and anti-establishment culture that caused the negative connotation often associated with modders. This influenced the inventors of the game engine, John Carmack & John Romero, who furthered the culture by insisting on the game engine embracing the free and open source movement. As such, this study is placed within the scholarly debate of open source media technologies, or open cultural production. The second epoch, I consider characteristic for its participatory audience, or fandom culture, with modders as fans. With their innovative ideas and critical perspective on the current state of the cultural media production, the modders, through their participation, forced the studios/publisher to adopt the open source movement to stay alive. The third epoch is distinct for being an intersection of commons and market where value is negotiated in cultural production, and corporate actors struggle to enforce intellectual property while still benefiting from free labor (Hesmonhalgh, 2010, p. 279).

1.3. Research Questions & Aim

In the light of the above, and considered the presence of tension between modders and the publishers' recurrent strategies of value extraction from UCC, this thesis aims to investigate modders perceptions and experiences of recent strategies of relationship maintenance, and answer the following questions:

- What are the modders perceptions and experiences of their relationship with corporate actors?
- How do modders make sense of the strategies of value extraction, in relation to their participatory practices?
- What kind of moral reactions do these strategies provoke on the part of the modders?

Answering these research questions, I believe, will contribute to a better understanding of the modders participation in the community that carries an intricate relationship with corporate actors.

2. Previous Research

Most existing research on modders focuses on how they exist in a tight-knit relationship with the digital game industry. This results in a primary focus on how their production adds value to the cultural production of the digital game industry and, in turn, how the corporate actors benefit from this production (See, for example, Postigo, 2007). In this section, I will outline the academic field of which this study resides within and provide concepts and knowledge about modders in the digital game industry as well how the study of modders takes part of a broader societal phenomenon of participatory culture, commodification, and open source production. This section consists of three sub-sections. In the first sub-section, I introduce previous research on modders and their role in the digital game industry to provide a deeper understanding of the audience case at hand. Secondly, I present research on participatory culture as a subject of study, to place modders within the context of participation. Thirdly, I further this contextualization of modders, by placing them within the field of commodification and open production.

2.1. Modders in the Digital Game Industry

Postigo (2010) has provided extensive empirical research on modders and their practices. Postigo explains how the digital game industry take part of a bigger tendency in contemporary media industries of harnessing free labor (2010, p. 4), and questions how to do so while maintaining it free.

Postigo's studies explain modders motivation to be a form of moral economy where love, passion, and craftsmanship are central in modders discourses around their practices, while economic rationale and potential employment within the digital game industry is secondary or considered dubious (Ibid, p. 7). Postigo's analysis problematizes how modders are inside but outside of the digital game economy. Inside in the sense that their production is tethered into the market through EULAs or licensing on game engines, whereas modders themselves are kept outside as freelancers (ibid, p. 9 & 10). Postigo draws attention towards how modders media production as participation, is not very distinct from other types of media participation such as Facebook, Twitter, YouTube, or Wikipedia as he states: "while making a total conversion [mod] might not be the same as setting up a Facebook page, the category of consumption and use is the same. They both contribute content to a proprietary market system which derives value from the production" (Ibid, p. 14). To Postigo, the distinction lies in the awareness as to when participation is production or not, as modders are aware of their practices as media production, and as such they are also more conscious about how this production is taken advantage of by the means of technological, legal, or cultural control or limitation. Whereas on social media networks, such as Facebook, Twitter or YouTube "the discourse of participation occludes in many ways the discourse of production" (Ibid, p. 15).

While Postigo's focus illustrates the world of modding from the perspective of the individual, Sotamaa (2010) provides deeper knowledge as to the collaborative nature of modding. Sotamaa suggests the distinction between modders divided into three categories: "mission makers, add-on makers, and mod-makers" (Sotamaa, 2010, p. 244), to understand the motive for collaboration. There are simply varied forms of expertise, all needed if a modder aspires to create bigger projects. In practice, it takes the form of modders voluntarily donating their pieces of work to mod teams to get more attention. This naturally formulates an organizational model consisting of "project lead", "core members" and less active members (ibid, p. 245). The motive for taking part in these collaborative projects, Sotamaa identify as being partly due to the state of the industry, where the standard for digital content is increasingly ambitious and demand expect quality (p. 243), and partly due to the effectiveness when sharing objectives (p. 248). Sotamaa explains how modders cannot simply be understood as fans, as that often negates the notion of a fan of fans. In other words, fan cultures around prominent modders and their production is not unusual which becomes problematic when considering that the company sets the limit for the modders ability to deliver to this fan crowd (Sotamaa, 2010, p. 243 & 247).

2.2. Participatory Culture

Van Dijck (2009) questions the assumption of participatory culture: Due to the different levels of user participation: 'creator', 'spectator', and 'inactives', it becomes misleading to adopt participatory culture to describe contemporary media culture, especially when considering that 13 percent of users of UGC sites are 'active creators', while 19 percent qualify as 'critics' that engage in peer review activities of UGC (Van Dijck, 2009, p. 44). Furthermore, Van Dijck argues that UGC is necessarily influenced by the platform's coded abilities to stir and direct, which is often neglected factors when ascribing users with participatory and community commitment. More specifically, assistive tools such as 'most discussed', 'top rated', and 'most viewed' are vulnerable to manipulation from corporate actors as well as users (Ibid, p. 45) and therefore it will necessarily shape agency. Van Dijck

also identifies the two side of the coin in user participation or contribution. Whereas users, on the one hand, create user-generated or created content, they on the other also provide corporations with valuable data when signing up or agreeing to end-user agreements, furthermore users are being increasingly monitored which the user agree to 'willingly or unknowingly' (p. 47). Van Dijck concludes that there is a need for discovering the truth behind the metaphor of participatory culture, and its "lingering images of self-effacing, engaged and productive cybernauts" (Ibid, p. 54).

Kerr (2013) share this concern for how we ought to understand participation coupled with corporate actors growing use of website's interfaces to maneuverer users into obscure forms of participation (2013, p. 29). To Kerr this is especially problematic in the context of digital games, where the standard is that players submit to unlimited corporate monitoring of their behaviors when installing the game and signing the EULA. In relation to modders and their content creation, distinct from van Dijck's cybernauts, Kerr observes a different type of user control and limitation forced upon players. Control in the form of the EULA's terms of use restricting the modder from commercializing their created mods (Kerr, 2013, p. 32), in other words, the company assures intellectual property over the modders creations, whenever they use the accompanied toolkits with specific digital games. The limitation is assured by the engine or toolkits provided by the company, as it can developed to only enable the modder towards specific types of production (Ibidem). However, some game studios assure to have tools and forums readily available as forms of encouragement of this type of user production. Kerr concludes that "player production cannot (...) be seen as 'co-creation' in the sense that they are created in an asymmetrical and transparent process. It is an uneven playing field." (Ibid, p. 36).

Finally, this increase in participation, whether cultural or technological determined, demands the consideration of social networks as sites of a potential power struggle between participating users and producing corporate actors (Dovey & Kennedy, 2011, p. 14). However, within this potential power struggle, it needs to be carefully considered what is 'resistance' and what is 'incorporation' (Ibidem). In other words, the motivation for media participation might be an act of defiance or resistance, such as modders trying to escape the confines of the game design by redesigning. Nevertheless, the case is that these forms of participation have been, and still are, systematically incorporated and commodified into the networked economies.

2.3. Commodification & Open Production

Mayer's (2016) empirical study on producers and audience in the post-Katrina New Orleans HBO series *Treme* (2010-2013), interviewed local people about the production and reception of the program. Mayer discovered that many of the program viewers had become workers on the program, "in the form of unpaid volunteers or minimally paid extras" (2016, p. 711). This participation in media production share traits with that of Modders in many ways. Mayer explains how executives could rely on local volunteers producing free and immaterial labor by promoting the program and legitimating brand networking (Ibid, p. 713). The production work led to efficient low-cost incorporation, that in addition to providing free labor, also served as an insurance of the show receiving a local authenticity, and easily accessible place-base knowledge (ibidem.) One of Mayer's valuable observations in relation to commodification of participation is the importance of place as a drive for viewers to offer unwaged flexible and skilled labor (Ibidem.). Which Mayer explains to be

due to the ways producers and consumers establish their measures of value for media use (Ibid, p. 715).

Terranova (2013) conceptualizes this process of commodifying immaterial labor as *the digital economy*. In explaining the nature of the digital economy, Terranova compares it to an industrial economy where workers attempted to reach fulfillment through work but were generally alienated from the means of production owned and controlled by producers. Whereas in the digital economy “the worker achieves fulfillment through work and finds in her brain her own, unalienated means of production” (p. 37). For the digital economy to exist, the worker needs to be cultivated into participation in exchange flows of which the worker is unaware or outside (ibid, p. 38). In raising awareness around commodification practices of immaterial labor, or *free labor*, Terranova takes example in Netscape’s layoffs in favor of becoming an open source company in 1998, as an example of corporate “reliance, almost a dependency, is part of larger mechanisms of capitalist extraction of value that are fundamental to late capitalism as a whole.” (Terranova, 2013, p. 49) The problem that Terranova identifies, is the venture mania of open source company’s neo-liberalist assumption of this relationship between free labor and corporate value extraction to be unproblematic, as Terranova perceives the commodification of free labor to be sustaining and exhausting its cultural and affective labor (p. 50).

While much research has been done on games as online communities (Taylor, 2006; Yee, 2006; Balkin & Noveck, 2006) as well as the study on exploitation of “free labor” (Terranova, 2013), “playbour” (Kücklich, 2005), and “invisible labor” (Downey, 2001; Postigo, 2003), in general; modders remain understudied, not in terms of their practices (Nieborg & Graaf, 2008; Sotamaa, 2010), motivations (Poor, 2013; Postigo, 2010), and role in the digital game industry (Jöckel & Schwarzer, 2008), but in terms of how they experience corporate reception towards their hobby practices as well as corporate interference with their participatory practices.

The mentioned scholars remain at the notion of participation and its free flow as an example of overlaps of consumption and production that are worth researching on its own (e.g. Sotamaa, 2010, p. 240). But little attention appears to be given towards discovering modders own accounts and experiences of corporate commodification practices of their hobby, or the negotiation of conflicting interests between modders and digital game companies (Guzzetti, 2016, p. 255). This study seeks to contribute to research on modders in the digital game industry by investigating how modders experience these corporate commodification practices.

3. Theoretical & Conceptual Framework

In order to grasp the ways in which modders understand, make sense of, and react to the digital economy and corporate strategies of value extraction, I use Andrew Sayer’s concept of Moral Economy (2003; 2004; 2007; 2017). In addition, I will go into a deeper conceptual discussion of participation, to establish an explicit analytical framework around modders media production. As such, this section introduces the theoretical framework through which I approach the problem of corporate commodification of free labor, and how I operationalize this framework in relation to the analysis of the gathered material.

Sayer's concept of moral economy has a scarce presence in media and communication studies. However, the moral economy has received increasing attention from cultural studies scholars (Banks, 2006; Hesmondhalgh, 2016, Green & Jenkins, 2009). In addition, but without specifically using the concept, a number of scholars address the interactions between moral economies, specifically common-based peer production (Benkler, 2006) and open-source production, concentrating on the exploitative tendencies (Arvidsson, 2008; Andrejevic, 2008; Cova et al., 2011; Firer-Blaess and Fuchs, 2014; Roig et al., 2014). The tendency of these scholars is to think of moral economies from a dichotomous point of view, wherein common-based peer production is supposed to act out of morality of mutuality, and market economy remains obliged to act as rational utility maximizers (Velkova & Jakobsson, 2016, p. 17). This is the framework proposed by Graham Murdock (2011) for understanding the relationship between the economy of the market and the economy of the commons, as distinct moral economies. However, as Velkova and Jakobsson accurately suggest, this dichotomization to be limiting for a deeper understanding of the relationship between regimes and their value negotiation (2016, p. 16). This is a concern that Sayer's concept of moral economy seeks to address, and I seek to provide a case of with this study.

3.1. Moral Economy

By using Sayer's concept of Moral Economy, I can get a better understanding of how corporate strategies of value extraction, within the digital economy, influence, or change modders perception of their relationship with studios and publishers, by eliciting how moral sentiments and norms determine modders meaning-making of their relationship with corporate actors. I do this by identifying and analyzing accounts that suggest an understanding of the digital game industry as a relationship between modders and corporate actors.

The definition of moral economy is the understanding of economies as "moral sentiments and norms that influence economic behavior and how these are in turn influenced, comprised, or overridden by economic forces" (Sayer, 2003, p. 341). Sayer is concerned with the modern neo-liberalist misinterpretation of economy as a distinct abstraction independent of the social and cultural, as he claims: "we are accustomed to thinking of capitalism as a form of economic organization in which responsibilities to others are instantly discharged and cleared with the simple exchange of goods for money" (Sayer, 2004, p. 11). Banks identify this phenomenon as entrepreneurs' considerations of ethics and morality as 'uncool' or 'old' economy hang-ups (2006, p. 457).

The use of moral economy can be traced back to E.P. Thompson (1971) who showcased the co-existence of economy and moral as regulatory forces among 18th century villagers, that would riot against farmers selling their products outside of the village, when there were still villagers in need. What is interesting is the principles of mutuality, or "I'll scratch your back if you'll scratch mine" in public response to the neo-liberal free rider problem.

In other words, moral orientations and norms influence and structure all types of economic activities, and gradually become socially and culturally dependent, as moral and norms become "compromised, overridden or reinforced by economic pressures" (Sayer, 2007, p. 262). By all types of economic activities, Sayer points towards the notion of economy as a provision system that includes those activities that stand outside of the monetary system (Sayer, 2004, p. 2). These activities for example can be parents' feeding their children or adults taking care of their elderly that are just as economic

as shopping food in the grocery store. Sayer argues that this moral taps into the economy in general, as economic actions are not only driven by self-interest, but also by rights, entitlements, responsibilities and appropriate behavior (Ibid, p. 3).

Sayer's use of the concept offers two ways of adaptation. On the one hand, moral economy is a concept of study as it articulates a theoretical standpoint of economies being dependent on norms and moral, and this stands in opposition to mainstream neo-liberal ideas of market economy. On the other hand, moral economy offers an analytical approach in two senses (Elder-Vass, 2015, p. 36). Firstly, by "the study of how economic activities of all kinds are influenced and structured by moral dispositions and norms, and how in turn those norms may be compromised, overridden or reinforced by economic pressures" (Sayer, 2004, p. 2). Secondly, by evaluating subjective normativity and morality on "how economic arrangements affect well-being" (Sayer, 2016, p. 262).

Therefore, moral economy is a normative approach, as it takes culture of shared understandings, practices, values and belief seriously, something otherwise typically hurried over (Hesmondhalgh, 2016, p. 208).

In applying the concept of the moral economy to modders meaning-making around corporate strategies of commodification within the digital game industry, one can say that the relationship between studios/publishers and modders is a provision system of moral sentiments and norms that determines modders meaning-making of their relationship with corporate actors.

3.2. Participation

As I have already shed light upon in previous research, participation is central concepts in the context of modders and UCC. In this sub-section, I will present Henry Jenkins and Nico Carpentier's take on this concept. By adopting the concept of participation, I aim to place modders practices within the scholarly debate and suggest how we ought to understand them as participatory.

Jenkins does not treat audience in the dichotomy of active or passive, but instead focus on media technologies being in transition of enabling participation for the broader audience (Jenkins, 2016, p. 3). Jenkins treats fandom in general, as a case of audience "first-comers" in this media convergence of participation. Instead of talking about passive or active audience, Jenkins draws on Pierre Levy's concept of *knowledge communities* (Jenkins, 2016, p. 4 & 116), to conceptualize audiences within convergence media culture. Jenkins explain convergence to be an individual's brain process of extracted pieces of information from various media flows, that are used to formulate meaning-making of everyday life, this consumption is in turn, turned into a collaborative process, as meaning-making is not done in isolation but instead in collaboration through participatory media (Ibid, p. 4).

Jenkins makes the distinction between interactivity and participation, to be the difference between technology and the social. To him, interactivity refers to technologies enabling or limiting consumer feedback, such as TV's only permitting swapping channels versus digital game often have multiple options of feedback interaction available, as such constraints are designer made and technologically determined. Participation is framed by social codes such as norms of not speaking in a movie theater and is less controlled by corporate media industries but instead negotiated by media consumers (Jenkins, 2016, p. 133).

However, while Jenkins perceives participation to be an inherent social drive within every individual, channeled through different forms of interests (or fandom), it is not that which has necessarily caused the transitioning to current state of convergence media. Instead, it is largely due to commercial interest from media industries, as convergence media culture provides advantages in media conglomeration; it opens up multiple ways of selling content; and it creates social relations with customers which boosts their consumer loyalty (*ibidem*). As such participation and knowledge communities exist within a site of power exerted by media corporations as well as between participants (Jenkins, 2006, p. 142). And participation is largely made possible due to the accelerating technological facilities of Web 2.0, that are made readily available for the general public who can access the internet.

On the broader discussion on participation, Carpentier equates Jenkins' convergence culture with users accessing and interacting with media and draws on Pateman's (1970) definition of participation, to illustrate his point of influence or equal power relations in the decision-making process as significant determiner for how interaction plays out (Carpentier, 2011a, p. 520). In other words, he emphasizes the power dynamics between users, that sets the terms for whether participation is actually an option, and therefore find it fitting to distinguish between interaction and participation.

In comparing formal organizational structures with online participatory practices, Carpentier points towards the consequences of the participatory process being limited in intensity due to power and decision making, which is often assumed to be balanced between the collaborators (2011b, p. 201). Therefore, Carpentier suggests interaction to be an adequate concept describing what is actually going on (2011b, p. 202). Especially in cases where the platforms are "organisations, where audience members can effectively produce media content, without allowing them opportunities for (equal) decision making (...) to ensure that consumer freedom evolves in the 'right' way" (*ibid*, p. 205). In short, Carpentier is concerned about the celebration of the discursive active audience and how it omits the finer social structures that surround participation and production activities. As well as, how "[t]he locus of control of many of the interfaces that facilitate and structure these participatory processes remains firmly in the hands of companies that are outside the participatory process" (Carpentier, 2011a, p. 527).

Carpentier perceives audience participation to be two-fold: it can reveal itself as either participation 'in', or participation 'through' media. In other words, "[t]hese components are the participation in media production [and] the participation in society through the media" (*ibid*, p. 521) respectively. Participation 'in' media Carpentier considers to be non-professionals' production of content or other types of output in media, as well as participation in media-decision making concerning the structural circumstances of particular media networks, such as, forums, social media, etc. Through these participatory practices, the audience is allowed to be actively influencing the media sphere they traverse in everyday life, by actively contributing or changing its structural limitations (Carpentier, 2011a, p. 520). Based on this Carpentier sees participation to be of political-ideological nature which is manifested in a struggle "to minimize or to maximize the equal power positions of the actors involved in the decision-making processes that are omnipresent in all societal spheres." (Carpentier, 2016, p. 11).

Carpentier and Jenkins share the concern of structural implications surrounding participatory activities and its way of directing, controlling or limiting the participatory culture. However, they seem to be addressing the phenomenon from two different understandings of what the audiences participate in. On the one hand, Jenkins' cases of fandom participation in the knowledge communities are assumed to be what the audience participates in. Carpentier, on the other hand, emphasizes the permanent power struggle between participants and the materiality surrounding their practices democratic or political practices. The difference lies between what can be considered as participating knowingly or unknowingly. Jenkins addresses a sort of conscious participation whereas Carpentier addresses unconscious participation. That is, fans participate in their knowledge communities knowingly with that aim in mind, whereas uploading fan-art that infringes copyright law is an unconscious participatory act as it is participative in the negotiation or power-struggle around IP between media corporations and fans.

This gray area of defining when and what is participation is not necessarily more tangible with conceptual precision. Carpentier suggests distinguishing between minimalist and maximalist participation, to widen the spectrum that has otherwise been recognized by access, interaction, and participation, as ranks illustrative of intensity. Carpentier takes the example of interactive films being a case of interactivity becoming minimalist participation, as audience members take on an active role in determining the order of the segments of the film that will be screened (Jenkins & Carpentier, 2013, p. 276). But with this form of participation, do they participate in the segment that should be screened only? Or do they also, with this act, participate in how film-viewing will be done in the future? Do they participate in norm-creation around how participants should interact with this new way of viewing films? and do they participate in the industry moving closer to new media of video games and away from the viewing industry of film making?

I argue that the intensity of participation or interaction does not necessarily provide any support for the understanding of audience participatory culture and may instead be misleading, as the intensity depends on what aspects or the participatory act that is looked upon. On the one hand, perceiving participation in interactive films as the act of selecting segments suggests a rather low intensity level. On the other hand, if the participatory act is seen in the light of its potential contribution; discursively, normatively and its impact on the market, it may be perceived as a relatively higher level of intensity.

While giving up Carpentier's perception of participation intensity, I adopt the understanding of participation 'in' and 'through' media, as I believe the notion of participation through media to move beyond Jenkins idea of participation. Participation through media allows for analysis of how it moves beyond technological accessibility, and offers an answer to Jenkins' problematization of the current terminological overreach of participation: "The more I push down on the concept of participation, the more I return to the issue 'participation in what?'" (Jenkins & Carpentier, 2013, p. 272). As explained above, this type of participation through media, Carpentier perceives to be political-ideological and in a power struggle over conditions of the participatory practices as well as equal decision-making power. However, I perceive participation 'through' media to be not necessarily conscious participation, as individuals are not necessarily aware of nor have an ambition for changing the media infrastructure, industry, and community.

4. Methodology

In this section, I introduce the methodological framework. Firstly, I outline the different types of empirical data collection followed by a motivation for my method choice and what I receive from using it as well as what research paradigm I perceive this study to reside within. Secondly, in the following subsection, I present the structure and approach for collecting the empirical material. This is then followed by some reflections on validity, limitations and ethical considerations.

This study adopted interviews, both written and oral, as a method for collecting material. This choice was based on the theoretical scope of the study of eliciting moral and ethical sentiment towards the relationship between studios and modders. I perceived the task to be relatively difficult, as the debate on various modding forums on this particular relationship, modders as well as mod-users often engage in the debate by arguing for the benefits that companies can gain by embracing mods and the modding communities. So, I believed it to be a challenge to get to the point where the modders would reveal sentiment, as well as very time consuming that further risked irritation on the side of the informants.

As such the interviews were semi-structured, as I used probe questions to lead the user towards sentimental accounts whenever I felt that they were going astray and rationalizing too much or arguing for the benefits of incorporating mods. In the case of the written interviews, I used written follow-up questions asking the informants to elaborate on accounts where they had averted from personal accounts. The purpose of the follow-up questions was to assure comprehensive accounts (Kvale, 2007, p. 13). Leading to the method is qualitative. Qualitative research I considered to be an adequate method for the purpose of eliciting modders perception and experiences of corporate actors attempt to maintain a relationship with them. Qualitative research provides the opportunity of grasping these multiple meanings and experiences and later through analysis, question these meanings and experiences (Markham & Baym, 2009, p. 34).

The interviews had its advantages as well as limitations. While it provided a safe space for the informants to elaborate on personal experiences and sensitive, emotional, or controversial experiences, it was limiting in that information was only revealed depending on the questions posed, and as an outsider of the modding community, my scarce technical knowledge may have disabled me from posing the right questions.

The modders were reached out by convenience-sampling, as I expected that participants would be scarce due to reasons such as, some modders may be limited by NDA if they have some kind of arrangements with corporate actors, and others may not want to expose themselves at the risk of losing out on later job opportunities in the digital game industry. For these reasons, the informants are also kept anonymous in this study. The response rate was low after establishing the first contact, so I adopted chain-sampling to reach more informants. I also thought of it as a chance to strengthen my persuasion with a social motive for contacting informants e.g. ‘person A suggested I contacted you for this interview’.

Nexus Mods was the primary domain that was used as resources for reaching out to modders. I reached six modders through this platform. I also attempted to reach modders through other forums,

such as ModDB and GibberLings3, which yielded one modder from ModDB who were willing to participate.

In the study of modders and their perception of corporate strategies of extracting value from their productivity, I generate general knowledge of modders and the realities of their participatory fan production by interacting with participants and their “life-worlds” through interviews (Ibid, p. 70). By adopting Sayer’s concept of moral economy, I make the idealist ontological assumption that modders are active meaning-makers of corporate actors’ interaction with them, and that these meanings or social realities are made up knowledge and shared between social actors (Blaikie, 2009, p. 93). As such, this thesis makes the epistemological assumption of constructionism that the study of these processes of meaning production is the means to knowledge (Ibid, p. 95). Therefore, the researcher stance is of interpretivism, as it recognizes the social constructed reality of participants and informants, as well as the necessary meaning they produce in everyday life (Blaikie, 2009, p. 99). What this means for the study in practice is that, during the research process of these production activities, the interpretivist (the researcher) construct models of typical meaning making (ibidem), and that these models of typical meaning making are being reinterpreted into technical language by the researcher.

4.1. Approach

In this subsection, I present the generic information about the informants and participants and how I went about collecting the material for the respective methods. All material was collected within the timeframe between March 20th and 6th of April 2019. The total amount of interview informants was nine, whereof four participated in online oral interviews and five in online written interviews.

The informants were not selected based on their technical abilities around modding, but instead based on whether they considered themselves a modder. Of the Informants reached by the Nexus Mods forum, two declined to participate as they did not consider themselves modders. In the case of Gibberlings3, one declined for the same reason. Informants were reached through the modding forum Nexus Mods, where initial contact was attempted by writing a forum post which yielded no results. Therefore, I made a second attempt by sending private messages to members who had participated in forum debates on the same forum, related to the topic of this study. In the message I referred to the discussion as a motivator for me reaching out to the person, this was an attempt to be attentive towards informants not feeling expendable. In this initial stage of establishing contact, I received roughly ½ response rate, where one third declined my invitation to participate in an interview.

From this first stage of contact, I received one participant from the ModDB forum, who was willing to conduct an online oral interview, and two participants who agreed to an online written interview, conducted through private messaging on Nexus Mods’ forum. While the first stage of contact was convenience sampling, the second stage was chain-sampling, that was done by asking current informants if they knew any other modders that would be interested in participating in the study. The suggested informants, I contacted by introducing myself and mentioning the referrer. Through this sampling-method, three participants suggested me to contact a total of eight potential participants, whereof four agreed to participate, three in online oral interviews and three in online written interviews.

The interview material was transcribed and analyzed using Andrew Sayer's concept of moral economy as well as the concept of participation inspired by Nico Carpentier. These concepts were adopted in a thematic coding process of six steps taken from Braun & Clarke's paper *Using thematic analysis in psychology* (2006). (1) In the first step, I familiarized myself with the data which was an integrated part of the transcribing process. (2) In the second step, I generated initial codes. For this, I used the qualitative analysis software NVivo as an assistive tool to maintain an overview of the whole body of data. The data was approached with specific questions in relation to the theoretical concepts with the aim of discovering as many potential themes or patterns in the material. (3) In step three, I sorted the different codes from step two into different potential themes and initially working out the relationship between codes, and then later themes. (4) In step four, I reviewed the potential themes generated in step three to ascertain enough data existed to support them, this was done in two steps, the first being review of coded extracts for each potential theme, and the second being evaluation of validity of themes in relation to the whole body of material, and to discover any missed codes and/or themes, case by case. (5) In step five, I defined and named the final themes to adequately communicate the themes for the reader. (6) In step six, I reported the findings by conducting the analysis and moving beyond the description of the data by thoroughly incorporating the theoretical framework of the moral economy and participation.

Of the written interviews, the informants were three Americans, one Spanish and one Dutch, and all male. The interview questions were sent to the participants after agreement of participation, which was followed by follow-up questions depending on the depth and understanding of the research aim that the informants insinuated with their answers to the first body of interview questions. As an example, if the informant had limited sentimental accounts, then the follow-up questions emphasized on how the informant felt about problems that had been raised in previous answers.

Of the online oral interviews, the informants were two Americans, one German-Canadian and one Australian, and all male. In terms of practicality, the interviews were conducted using Skype voice call with the voice recording software Amolto Call Recorder. The interviews were semi-structured and consisted of five parts. (1) The interview commenced with a brief introduction of the study, following by questions about informants age, gender and nationality. (2) The initial questions primarily focused on the informant's hobby as a modder, s/he's motivations, type of mods and for what games as well as the timeframe for this hobby. (3) After having received a picture of the modders background, the interview turned towards the focus of the thesis, by posing questions on the informant's experiences with corporate actors. (4) Then the interview proceeded to the focus on the modding community, which community the informant participated in, the uniqueness of this community, and potential differences between independent and corporate created modding communities, pros and cons. Finally, the informant was asked about s/he's opinion on the relationship between studios/publishers and modders, and asked to elaborate on the good, the bad and what could be better.

Throughout the interview, I used prompts to further the informants' account, or probes to prevent the informant from going off topic, or in cases where informants would be resistant towards eliciting

sentiment and instead adopt reason and present arguments for or against corporate wrongdoing for example.

4.2. Validity & Limitations

In terms of validity, the most reoccurring issue that I have come across in conducting the interviews, was the tendency from informants of wanting to rationalize their accounts into strong arguments. In turn, my attempt to extract sentimental accounts might have come across as “beside the point” to the informants, as they in some cases appeared to be interpreting the interview to be aiming at understanding the benefits of modders contribution. Ultimately, this could have caused a sense of disappointment on the side of the interviewees, when realizing that this study was not aimed at eliciting the value of their hobby in the digital game industry. The concern for rationalization was a particular concern in the case of the written interviews, as the nature of written text limit the extent to which the researcher can extract comprehensive accounts. As such, most follow-up questions attempted to push the informant to address fairness and moral, by for example asking the informant to address feelings and sentiment. While rationalizing accounts was difficult to maneuverer, acquiring extensive accounts was not an issue, as most informants were very informative and elaborate even though they were writing. This can be due to the nature of all informants being frequent players of digital games, and as such, they have developed sophisticated writing skills that blurs the assumed limitation of response depth when conducting written interviews.

In terms of limitations, this study is qualitative and cannot assure equal representation of modders and their perception of the relationship between modders and corporate actors in the digital game industry. All informants of the written interviews were reached through the Nexus platform and are therefore only representative of modders within this platform’s ecosystem. Whereas the informants of the oral interviews were reached through Nexus, Twitter, Reddit, and ModDB, and therefore suggest a broader perspective. However, as one informant explains, prominent modders often make use of multiple platforms for various reasons, but mostly to maximize visibility of their content, which arguably makes them a case of audience across multiple platforms of distribution. Therefore, while the interviews can be perceived as a methodological platform-centrism, due to that almost all informants were reached through Nexus Mods, the nature of modders questions the level of isolation this empirical data represents. To make this practice explicit I posed the question to all informants of method 1 and 2, if they participate in any other platforms or communities related to modding.

While the gender and nationality of the informants points towards the material representing a male and western dominated perspective, I will not go into deeper considerations of this, although it could be relevant for further studies.

4.3. Ethics

In conducting the interviews, all informants were introduced to the aim of the thesis as well as the nature of the questions that they were asked prior to conducting the interview. When agreeing to participate, the informant was then informed about the principles of confidentiality, this included that the informant would be kept anonymous and any accounts that could potentially identify them would be excluded from the material. In addition, the informants were encouraged to omit any questions they did not wish to answer. The choice of anonymity was partly motivated by some informants being

in a relatively sensitive state, as well as my own assessment of the current state of the industry and modders often having signed Non-Disclosure Agreement (NDA) if they are in some kind of affiliation with studios/publishers. Some modders may be interested in pursuing a professional career within the digital game industry, and as such may find participating in the study less comfortable without anonymity. The NDA enables companies to demand compensation if the other party discloses information that hurt the company in one way or another. NDA is another tool for IP control, that has a prominent presence and use in the creative industries, where ideas and knowledge are the commodity and corporate property, in other words, the knowledge and ideas of an employee (Davies & Sigthorsson, 2013, p. 79). Therefore, it becomes risky for informants to reveal information that may reside within corporate sphere of interest. As such, I will be referring to informants as A – I.

5. Analysis

In this section, I present the main findings from the thematic coding process as well as the analysis. Firstly, I present the codes that emerged throughout the coding process, and what codes that later became the themes, followed by an explanation and illustration of the themes connections as well as the codes interconnection with each other and the themes. The illustration (See fig. 1 below), serves as a point of departure that summarizes what the respondents have addressed in the interviews, and as such, provides a general picture of the intricate relationship between modders and corporate actors in the digital game industry. Secondly in the following three sub-sections, I draw on the interviews to exemplify these connections between the established codes and themes, followed by adopting Andrew Sayer's concept of moral economy as well as, Carpentier's conceptualization of participation to move beyond mere representation of the informants' accounts. However, the sampling is non-representational of modders in general, as it only serves the exploratory purpose.

As a result of the thematic coding process, a total of fourteen codes emerged, whereof two was discarded as a result of not being adequately relevant. These two codes were firstly, *Individual motivations*, meaning observations of informants engaging in modding practices or community engagement from purely individualistic motives. And secondly, modding practices being without *relational proximity*, as in patterns of modders not having any proximity influencers or relations with modding or programming expertise prior to becoming a modder. However, intriguing these patterns in the material are, they have little relevance for the aim of this thesis.

Of the remaining twelve codes three of the codes emerged as themes as a result of their dominance and reoccurrence in the material: *Relationship, Community, and Corporation*. In the process of analyzing the codes and themes and their connections, this map emerged (fig. 1). *Relationship* refers to accounts where the individual, as in the informants, address how they experience their relationship with corporations and communities. *Community* refers to accounts where informants address various modding communities and their distinct nature, as well as what the particular communities provide for them (the informant). *Corporation* refer to informants' accounts that describe their perception of corporate attitudes and behaviors towards modders and modding communities. Within accounts related to these three themes, nine distinctive traits became apparent.

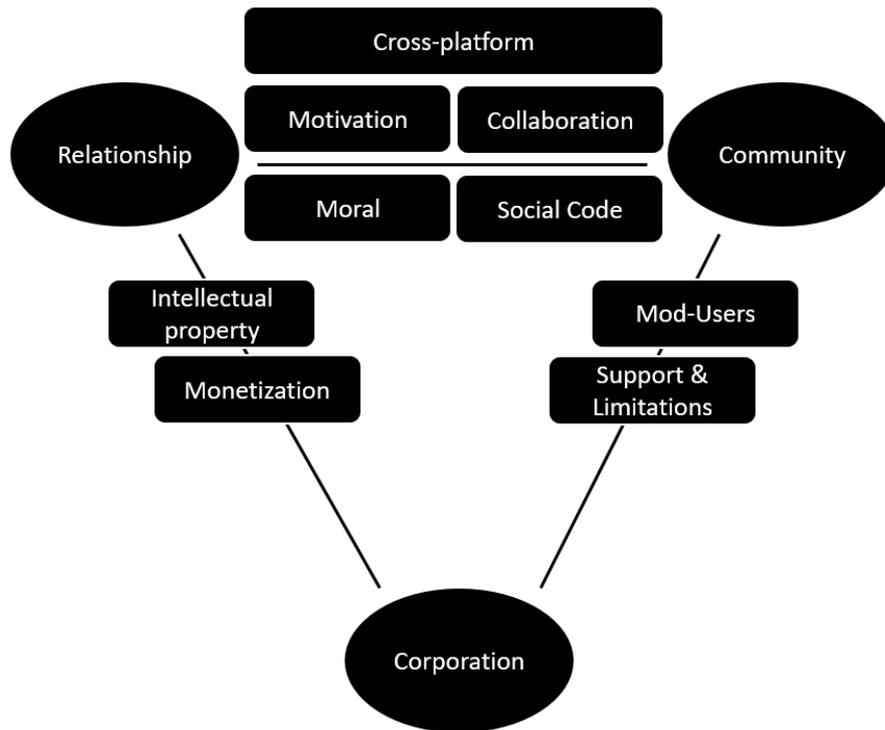


Figure 1 Thematic Coding Process

These traits were formulated into codes and located in the figure according to which context the informants explained them. For example, *Intellectual property* and *Monetization* were often addressed when the informants were asked to explain their relationship with corporations. These two initial codes were not mentioned when the informants addressed their relationship to communities, as such, they were identified as constituting informants experience of a relationship with corporations exclusively. On the other side of the triangular illustration, *Mod-Users* and *Support & Limitations* were identified as distinctive codes constituting how informants experienced the intrinsic relationship between corporations and the modding community or communities. Finally, the top of the figure illustrates what the informants frequently addressed, when describing their relationship with modding communities. For these traits the informants stressed the nature of: *Motivation*, *Collaboration*, *Moral*, and *Social Code*, to be *Cross-Platform* as the informants rarely dedicated themselves to one platform or community exclusively. As Informant E explains:

Nexus is the best place to upload mods as it does not have inconvenient technical limitations for authors that are seen on the other sites, and it has a relatively good systems for sorting mods, highlighting new mods, and searching mods. r/skyrimmods is good for hearing news and for discussing things with other modders. (Informant E)

As such, the nature of the traits varies depending on the platform, community and the game.

In the following sub-sections I present my analysis of the informants' accounts on their relationship with the modding communities and corporations. By adopting figure 1 as a structural approach to this analysis, I believe to make the material more tangible for analysis and comprehension.

5.1. Modder & Community

When informants address the modding community, it becomes evident that it has a big role to play for them to realize their passion for creating. The modding community works as a hub for the modders to receive feedback on on-going projects, seek out collaborative projects to join, upload finished projects for visibility, and most importantly it works as a social space to ask for or provide help to each other. As such they also select communities based on facilities available, as informant B illustrate:

I prefer Nexus Mods because it's the most stable and mainstream way of sharing your mods with others. The staff over at Nexus take great care to listen to the concerns of the community, and sometimes to a fault. They also have strict guidelines when it comes to honoring copyright from any given entity (...) But the #1 reason to use Nexus Mods is because it easily has the biggest audience of any given modding site. (Informant B)

Apart from the functionalist advantages such as visibility and reaching a broad audience with the UCC, the ascribed value to guidelines, being heard by moderators, and copyright standards, all suggests what Carpentier refer to as participation is a political-ideological negotiation. (Carpentier, 2016, p. 11). In other words, when modders select a forum for uploading and distributing their content they support the norms, values and codes associated with the community of the forum. Therefore, they also actively engage in a negotiation of the standard around how modders ought to participate or what participatory facilities that should be available. This negotiation poses a number of values that the modder have and expect from the community, which can be understood as social codes and moral. Informant B continues:

since the staff does such a great job of policing the site, you can rest assured that your files are being treated the way you want them to be treated. As far as r/SkyrimMods (...) [p]eople can engage with each other as equals, and the moderators there do a good job as well. Not to mention that it's by far the most active mod-devoted discussion forum that I know of (Informant B)

These social codes and enacted moral standards, of the modding communities, can present themselves in various ways, such as the *terms and condition* that the user checks upon when creating a profile for Nexus Mods, or by more socially negotiated codes that are not necessarily written down or immediately available but constitute the unifying norm of the community and its members. Informant H, who has been a moderator for multiple modding forums, explains how this could work out:

there were definitely rules about conduct, we had a code of conduct, and we expected people to abide by that. We expected that people (...) would say for example “hey, it is fine for people to redistribute this” or “I want people to feel free to fix potential bugs, but not update the content” etc. (Informant H)

These norms, values, and social codes therefore constitute of a general idea of copyright values of respect towards any kind of entity, being it a studio or an individual modders creations. Although the modding community spark from the open software movement, which is reflected in the assumptions that creations are for the knowledge community, and the author(s) are expected to clarify to what extent and how they wish their creations to be used by others. As such the norm, values, and social codes can be perceived as a moral economy of respect towards craftsmanship and ownership, at the

same time it is expected of creators that their intention is to share and enrich the knowledge community with their creations. **This answers the second research question, of how modders make sense of their own participatory practices, which in turn suggests how they will make sense of corporate strategies of value extraction.**

In some cases, the social codes and norms of a community platform are not necessarily morally justifiable for the modder as an individual. This is the case with Informant G's take on the Nexus Mods forum, which also illustrates how community norms, values and codes can be translated into platform design:

there is a hidden sub-forum that only mod authors are given access to after they have a certain amount of downloads or endorsements on their mods, and I don't like that either. For that reason, I kind of stop participating in the community on the Nexus, as I just didn't like it (Informant G)

This suggests what Carpentier perceives as the case of political-ideological struggle of limiting participation to interaction, as some members are cut off from the possibility of participation in the community's decision-making process (Carpentier, 2016, p. 11). This omnipresence of political-ideological struggle in the social sphere, has translated into the design of the Nexus Mods platform and as such echoes "organisations, where audience members can effectively produce media content, without allowing them opportunities for (equal) decision making (...) to ensure that consumer freedom evolves in the 'right' way" (Carpentier, 2011b, p. 205).

The social code, norms and values are negotiated and need to be justifiable for the modder's own perception of what is morally sustainable. At its core the modding community serves as a provision system, as informant H explains:

Just like in a real-life career, you need mentors, people who can give feedback and criticism, and you need people who have skills that you don't. So, community is a critical aspect for many people, including myself, on the path way of coming a professional. (...) Which is best achieved by asking for help and advice, and the community is the best place to do that. (Informant H)

This provision system relies heavily on the members knowledge and skills, as well as readiness to share it with each other. Therefore, this provision system can be understood as consisting of a knowledge community, wherein knowledge is that which is provided between members of the community. However, for the members to continuously provide this knowledge to each other, a moral economy of values and norms needs to be present, if the members are to trust each other. All informants emphasized the role of the community in them becoming a modder and mastering this advanced media production, which raises the question as to whether it is even possible to conceptualize modders as an entity that can exist in isolation. The case of modders joining the Bethesda Creation Club makes Informant B to not conceptualize modders as modders anymore, when they have contracted themselves with corporate actors, but rather as developers:

The idea of being a community involves at least, to some degree, a free or open platform with various contributors. The Creation Club doesn't fit this description. It's just Bethesda contracting developers and selling small DLC

As such it becomes problematic to the provision system, when a selected few, are favored in the decision-making process, have exclusive access to a subcommunity, or have committed themselves to certain paid mod systems. The hidden sub-forum, identified by informant G, suggests a certain awareness around the moral problem and how economic pressure compromises or overrides the moral economy. In other words, it jeopardizes the meaning-making that modders formulate around their relationship with the community of “who should do, get or control, what” (Sayer, 2017, p. 23), and therefore needs to be kept out of sight. For modders who commit to paid mod systems, they have effectively resigned from the moral economy and the provision system, and therefore cannot without hesitation, be considered modders. **This adds context in answering the second research question of how modders make sense of their own participatory practices. In broad terms, the modders sees their participatory practices as a provision system of equality that are uphold by the moral economy of values and norms and should not be undermined by external forces with different values.**

5.2. Community & Corporation

As I have illustrated in the previous sub-section, the relationship between modders and their community constitute of a motivation for learning. While the platforms are generally selected and used for visibility, engaging and participating in the platforms’ communities depends on the norms, values and social code of these communities, and whether they are sustainable with the modders own moral and values. In this subsection, I will provide insight as to how modders experience the relationship between the modding communities and studio/publisher.

Informant F, a modder who is a member of Bethesda Creation Club, sees relationships between modding communities and studios/publishers to vary depending on the company and the community:

Bethesda was probably the first to really approach the modding community by releasing the tools to such a wide scale and being supporting by the get-go when they released Morrowind. (...) But usually modding begins in general as a grassroots effort and isn’t as prompted from a corporate stand point. (Informant F)

Bethesda’s support of the modding community is something that most modders respect and perceive as ideal for how corporations ought to approach the modding community. What is noteworthy is informant F’s observation that modding is a grassroots effort, that exists whether or not the studio/publishers support it or wish for it. This is what the history of modding confirms, and it arguably provides a perspective on how modders may experience corporate interference in the community. While on the one hand modders respect the studio/publisher for making great games, and sometimes even making the tools available to ease the modding activities. On the other hand, the support of providing platforms for distribution is not essential for the modders’ practices, and as such it will remain just an addition to modders hobby practices. **This answers the first research question as to terms of how modders perceive their relationship with corporate actors as non-essential for their participatory practices.** This becomes apparent with informant A’s example of Steam Workshop as a supportive tool that does not meet the needs of the modder:

It tries to "force" mod authors and users into certain behaviours way too much, way too little freedom... and to me, that is exactly the opposite of what originally got me into modding (messing / tinkering around, freedom, doing whatever I like, however I like) (Informant A)

Studio/publishers support is therefore not necessarily always welcomed by the modders or considered supportive of their hobby practices rather than actually limiting. Informant E explains this balance between whether corporate support is experienced as support or not, to be the difference between needs and expectations:

Steam Workshop is also not great, but I think that's because they wanted to make a simple, general tool that could host any type of mod for any game. For heavily modded games this general platform just doesn't cut it (Informant E)

This suggests that low entry level for participation is not necessarily positive as the tools may make modding more accessible for some, others will experience the tools limiting in its capabilities. Informant G's account suggest that it has not just a potential technological limitation but also a social consequence:

the only way the community would really differ is perhaps the level of technical expertise, or know-how, or understanding that people have. (Informant G)

Technological in that the platform is limiting in its freedom and control, and social in that the individuals that it attracts may not be the most experienced modders, which makes the platform ill-suited as a hub for sharing and learning. This is interesting in relation to the debate on participation, as it contextualizes participation as not necessarily positive in its own right. In the case of modders, participation is truly a knowledge community as Jenkins conceptualizes it (Jenkins, 2016, p. 4 & 116), and the case stresses the need for participation to be vertical rather than horizontal, as in the technologies needs to be sophisticated and with limited barriers for freedom and control, if it has to attract skillful modders that can provide the social needs for a knowledge community to thrive and exist. Arguably, knowledge and skill become the foundation for the knowledge community as it both provide the know-how but also creates the dependency between community members that makes the social bonds so strong. This makes the knowledge community a very delicate and fragile one, as negative as well as positive outside intentions can cause harm to it.

Apart from technological community support in the form of engines, tools, and platforms/forums, the studios/publishers have attempted to enable other supportive features for the modding community. This is the case of Bethesda's attempt to open up for a paid mod system in 2015 where modders were able to charge money for their creations, with Bethesda taking a cut. Previously the relationship has been primarily concerning modders and studio/publishers, but with the introduction of paid mod system, mod-users entered the picture as informant F explains:

that system did not hold very long due to backlash from mod-users and some mod authors. But the majority of mod authors that I spoke with, they really wanted to try out this system and see where it would go. (Informant F)

In other words, the mod-users perception of mods and modders started to play a role in terms of directing production and defining participation in the modding community, as corporate actors did

not want to risk a negative backlash by not listening to its core customers: the players. Players, or mod-users, possess other norms and values that enters the moral economy of negotiating participation of “who should do, get or control, what” (Sayer, 2017, p. 23). Mod-users’ role in this negotiation can be perceived as on the side of the corporation, as the corporations are likely to favorize mod-users in this negotiation to avoid backlashes, as informant F explains.

While informant F points towards modders curiosity for a paid mod system, informant H suggests that the system itself had huge consequences for the modders and their communities as a whole:

there are expectations that are set around distribution, and modification, and alteration, and if you introduce money into that environment, it fundamentally changes the ethos in values. And so that will, whether the company intended it or not, obliterate a lot of that community, and it will be forced to regroup and reshape itself around a new model. (Informant H)

What informant refer to as disruption of relationships followed by the introduction of a paid mod system, can be understood as the introduction of a new value system that replaces the old values of the moral economy. Informant H’s account suggest a perception of the new system being a devaluation as the paid mod system compromises norms and values in the community that are overridden by economic pressure (Sayer, 2007, p. 262). **This adds additional context to the answer of the first research question of how modders perceive their relationship with corporate actors. It essentially depends on the type of support that corporate actors decide to provide for the community, where none of the posed features, of platforms with horizontal integration and paid mod system, spark any particular appreciation from the site of the modders.**

5.3. Modder & Corporation

As I have illustrated above, modders consider a vertical participation of low entry requirements/skill barrier at the cost of limited tools and freedom to be mediocre, as it removes the social aspect of a community hub with skillful individuals to help out and learn from, which makes a provision system in a knowledge community improbable. Furthermore, I have shown that mod-users enter the negotiation of modders’ participation, when studios/publishers introduce new participatory features that has an impact upon the mod-user. Informant H touched upon paid mod system and its implications on the modding community’s economy of trust. However, in this subsection, I will provide insight as to how modders experience their individual relationship with corporations in terms of this monetization approach as well as intellectual property.

Compared to the perceived community consequences, as a result of the paid mod system, a few modders perceive paid mods to be a natural and justifiable development in the modding scene, as informant D state:

I don't really oppose the idea of paid mods as I've already mentioned. Does it harm the relationship with the modding community? Sure, but I think it's a completely legitimate action (Informant D)

This difference in moral standpoint is either a matter of relativity, or dependency on the context. However, informant D acknowledges the consequences it has on the community, so arguably it is a matter of the context changing from paid mod system being perceived in the light of the modder

individually rather than from the perspective of the community, and participation being continuously negotiated, not just in between consumers, but also internally by each individual depending on the context of which participation is being discussed.

While informant D statement suggests contentment, informant G warns that the paid mod system cannot be the only means of a relationship between studio/publisher and modder:

I don't think you can nurture a community of user-created content if you only act in ways that appear to be seeking financial gain for your company. That appears to individuals negatively (...) They don't want to have a relationship with that company's financial and corporate goals, they want to have a relationship with the company's more human goals. (Informant G)

Informant G's account also reflect that, modders do not oppose negotiating conditions for modding that favors the studio/publisher, as long as social commitment to the modding community is nurtured. This is a case of the economic arrangements around modding affects modders well-being in a negative way (Sayer, 2016, p. 262), if the community is not tended to.

On the matter of well-being, Informant G goes on explaining how modders have a sense of being on their "own" in relation to the studio/publisher:

the specific case of Bethesda, they may be a little bit too "hands off" and too uninvolved in actually interacting with the community and resolving issues with the tools or the game sometimes. And this kind of perpetuates a perspective from modders that we are kind of on our own (Informant G)

This suggests why the modders are sensitive towards any initiative that insinuates a monetary and transactional motive, as the moral economy of the modding community is a provision system with social commitments towards each other, in other words, those activities that stand outside of the monetary system (Sayer, 2004, p. 2). This commitment, in turn, modders expect to see from the studio/publishers as well, whereas a paid mod system communicates a pure monetary commitment which cannot be morally justified if it is the only form of commitment. **This answers research question one, in terms of how modders experience their relationship consisting of a primary monetary commitment from corporate actors.**

Besides from the paid mod system and its sense of direct contact with the studio/publisher, modders often experience conflicts in relation to EULA and IP. As previously illustrate, corporate support can be limiting to some modders, whereas other corporate approaches are more explicitly controlling of modders agency. Informant F explains this in relation to legality:

when you install Skyrim or Fallout 4, you are first agreeing to the EULA that comes with the game and then later on if you want to use the tools you agree to a secondary agreement that provide the author with ownership of the mod (...) if you create something outside the secondary licensing system, you in theory give up all rights of ownership to Bethesda (Informant F)

Although the modder is granted ownership of the mod, the modder cannot make a profit off the creation, unless exclusively permitted to do so by the studio/publisher. For some modders this conflict

with principles of moral and integrity. Which informant I exemplify, when addressing companies use of EULAs:

If I do something for free, it is because I enjoy it. If you say, well because you used my stuff to make it, then I can make money off your free work. - then we have a problem. I have money, but it is a principle more than anything. (Informant I)

The legal gray area of whether and how corporate actors can earn money off from mods causes moral conflict on the side of the modder. Informant I's account specifically refer to the company 3D Realms, and their use of EULA to control modders and programmers, to secure monopoly on the monetization of their content. However, informant I acknowledges that he could have read the EULA more thorough and avoided the situation, yet his account suggests an overall moral principle of fairness, and legality does not make it any more acceptable.

Modders not realizing or paying attention to the legal area that their hobby creations resides within a site of power, exerted by media corporations. With EULA the power "remains firmly in the hands of companies that are outside the participatory process" (Carpentier, 2011a, p. 527). This is a common problem according to informant H. He poses that it has to do with the infant state of copyright law and how modders are unaware of the legal media sphere they traverse:

They [modders] tend to be taints [teenagers]. No one can expect that they can understand IP law, and yet they are working in a space that almost requires it. (Informant H)

As such, modders experienced relationship with studios/publishers can be summarized to these copyright laws and EULA enforcements. This becomes problematic to the modder from a moral standpoint of modding residing with a provision system where individuals share knowledge and help each other towards the social ambition of gifting the community with new creations. The moral economy between modders and the community determines modders meaning-making of their relationship with corporate actors in a way that may, often times, prevent them from perceiving IP infringement as anything else but a hostile attempt to limit or shut down a project for money and corporate control, or in other words, as attempts of "domination, exploitation, misrecognition, [and] abuse" (Sayer, 2007, p. 262). Furthermore, this is what Carpentier problematizes as the locus of control of structuring participatory processes by actors that remain outside of this process (Carpentier, 2011a, p. 527). So, this contextualization of participation makes it explicit that participation is not determined by the modder's motivation as much as by the conditions for participation being hostile or dangerous to the modder, that often times cause modders to participate with their creations elsewhere or not at all. **This answers the third research question, as to the reactions that are provoked on the site of the modders, towards corporate strategies of control and monetization.**

To summarize, in this section I have identified the intrinsic relationship between modders and corporate actors. A relationship that initially was presumed to only consist of the two, but from the material it was evident that the modding community was an important entity for modders determination of their relationship with studios/publishers. In terms of modders relationship between themselves and the modding community, they generally negotiate the conditions of participation whenever they select platforms by indirectly supporting that platforms set social codes and values,

which can be perceived as participating ‘through’ media. In terms of the relationship between community and corporation, corporate support is experienced as an addition that is welcomed but not essential for the community to exist. This results in corporate support often times being experienced as limiting rather than supporting, due to corporations attempt of integrating modders horizontally, to stream line and fit a broad spectrum of needs. This is counterproductive for a knowledge community that relies on members with know-how that are only attracted by vertical integration, as in quality and freedom of tools. Furthermore, the moment that paid mod systems are introduced, mod-users start to play a significant role in terms of directing production conditions of modding participation. This results in modders being forced to take mod-user’s values into consideration in the moral economy, that otherwise existed exclusively between modders in the modding community. In terms of the relationship between modder and corporation, modders experience their relationship with studio/publisher to be reduced to copyright law and EULA enforcement primarily due to scarce awareness around the legal media space they traverse.

While figure 1 illustrates the connection between the codes and themes, it also insinuates a creative ecosystem that suggests when and how modders and mod communities experience their relationship with one another, as well as corporate actors. This is an ecosystem that pivots around participatory processes that increased or limited in intensity due to power and decision making, that is not just determined by the participants, but also studio/publishers and mod-users, who reside outside of the participatory processes (Carpentier, 2011b, p. 201). In an attempt to illustrate this ecosystem, I propose figure 2, as an adaptation of the thematic coding process figure. It illustrates how the triangular relationship pivots around participations, and they all contribute towards the conditions for modders participation, as explained throughout this analysis. As well as centralizing participation in this relationship, I have also changed *Relationship* to *Individual* to better illustrate that this refers to the individual modder. Furthermore, I have added arrowheads to the connecting lines. The arrowheads are intended to illustrate the flow of the relationship, where the *Individual* modder and the modding *Community* consist of a moral and social space of negotiation. Whereas *Corporation* primarily have a one-way relationship where little is being negotiated. The flow of the relationship between the *Individual* modder and the modding *Community* is a flow of knowledge and skill that makes the community dependent on modders, and modders dependent on the community.

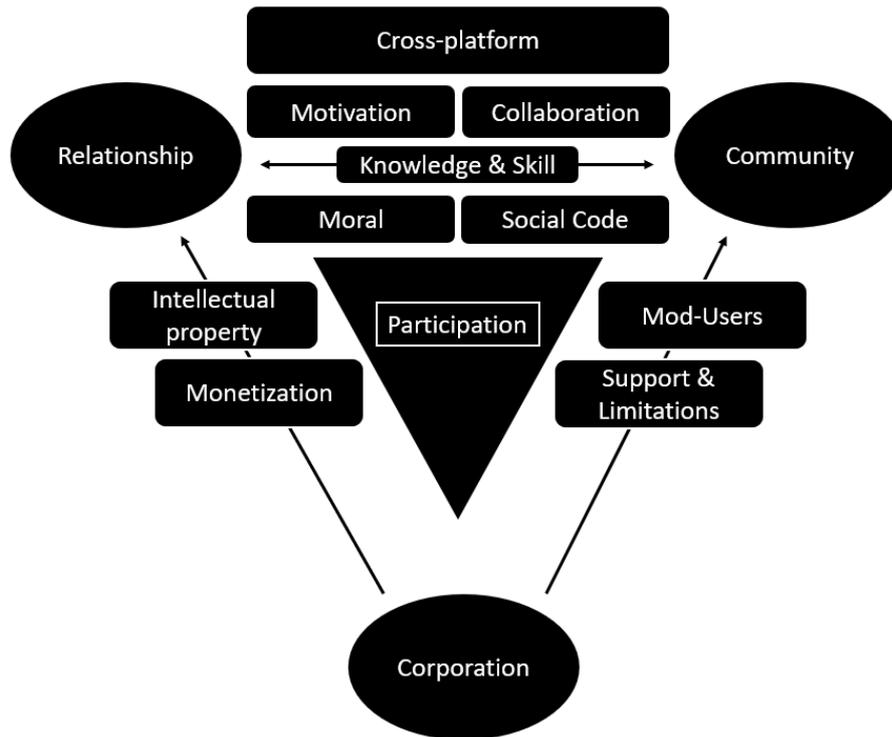


Figure 2 Participation in the Modding Scene

Figure 2 is illustrative of how the modders in this empirical material addressed their experienced relationship with corporate actors and is not generalizable. This is also why the flow is one way from *Corporation* to *Individual* and *Community*, as such it does not exclude that other modders have experienced the conditions differently. Furthermore, the triangle of participation is triangular to emphasize that all three entities play a significant role in framing participation around modding.

6. Discussion

The relationship between modders and corporate actors is an intricate and complex one. Figure 2 proposes an ecosystem, where relationship exist between the individual, the community, and the corporation. By comparing the relationship between modders & community and modders & corporations, it suggests why modders experience their relationship with corporations to be empty, hostile, or one-way (illustrated in fig. 2), as the relationship they are used to with the community, is considerably more affective and social. So, how does moral economy influence modders meaning-making of their relationship with corporate actors? While most modders showed clear signs of appreciation and respect towards studios/publishers supporting their participatory practices by making tools available (Illustrated as *Support & Limitations*), most of them also sought a more social relationship. Modders' accounts on their engagement with the community, from the moment they started becoming a modder and how they feel a sense of giving and receiving from the knowledge community, illustrates what Sayer argue: "economic activities of all kinds are influenced and structured by moral dispositions and norms" (Sayer, 2004, p. 2). However, moral disposition and norms are compromised at the individual level, by the introduction of the paid mod system (illustrated as *Monetization*), and some informants are well aware of how this hurts the community, yet they

choose to abide by it voluntarily. This does not only have to do with the opportunity of making a living off from otherwise free labor, but informants' accounts on mod-users, suggest a frustration with a third party entering the negotiation of the conditions of their participatory practices. It becomes apparent that the modders do not have anything against monetization, what they oppose is the attempt to direct or control their participatory practices, whether it is done by mod-users or corporations. Mod-users interference suggests that the power to negotiate is not necessarily determined by the intensity of participation, this is why we also cannot neglect the context of which participation resides within. This is an example of platforms coded abilities to stir and direct participatory practices to suit their needs (Van Dijck, 2009, p. 45). In relation to participation at large, this is an example of how the media platforms postulate a social ambition but are often driven by economic values that determine how power is distributed unevenly and not necessarily favoring the participatory culture.

Carpentier emphasize the need to contextualize participation and its conditions that are determined within an ideological power-struggle between the participants and holders of locus control. While this resonated in the informants' accounts, the power-struggle between studio/publisher and modders in the form of copyright infringement and EULA exemplify another kind of unknowing participation similar to what van Dijck identifies in other social media platforms (2009, p. 47). Due to the infant state of the copyright laws, some modders are not necessarily aware of the ideological power-struggle that they engage in whenever they create content. As modders enter a legal gray area unknowingly with their participatory practices, potential confrontation may be experienced much more hostile, as it is unexpected and often times also the only time that corporations react to modders as an exteriority. This may have to do with what Postigo problematizes in terms of modders being inside but outside of the digital game economy. Inside in the sense that their production is tethered into the market through EULAs, whereas modders themselves are kept outside as freelancers (Postigo, 2010, p. 9 & 10). From the modders perspective this becomes problematic when the tools and support that accommodate the EULAs are limiting in terms of enabling creativity and sophisticated media production, and how this makes the social community around the tools ill equipped to attract modders with know-how, to enrich the knowledge community. Therefore, modders in the digital game industry makes for a case that exemplify how the relationship between media industries and audience production and participation is not without complications and disputes.

Modders experiences and perception of their hobbies residing within an IP controlled environment, echoes Sarikakis', et al. (2015) discovery of the limits of creativity being set firmly by the industry rather than by the fandom culture. However, Sarikakis, et al. stress how the forms of authorship constructed by fans, such as code of conduct, reinforces the normativity of current copyright regulations, ultimately functions "as a mechanism of repression against any effort to negotiate, to discuss, to confront, to challenge or to alter the dynamics of the creative process" (p. 554). Therefore, while the authorship is favoring corporate actors very strongly, it is arguably also the adoption of IP as an integrated part of the moral economy between modders, that bolster the sense of copyright law not being negotiate able. With IP being a frequently visited topic within research on the creative industries (Hesmondhalgh, 2013; Tushnet, 2007; Boyle, 2010; Litmanm 2005), I consider this initial steps and original contribution towards understanding how IP enforcement and other means of locus

control is experienced as formulations of relationship between media corporations and their audiences.

Jenkins' convergence media culture suggests that culture ceasing to be a creative relationship, as Horkheimer and Adorno depicted it (Hodkinson, 2017, p. 102), was instead momentary and not an end destination for the creative industries. However, the study on modders perception of their relationship with corporate actors, exemplify how convergence culture remain targeted by other means of commodification that play an importance in not just framing participation but also in molding the conditions for creativity within knowledge communities.

When introducing a monetary system into the moral economy of modders, the knowledge community is removed. If the idea of being a modder is misunderstood to be an individual endeavor favored by unique skill sets, it makes sense to integrate this individual actor into the production line. However, what constitute being a modder is largely made possible by the benefits of being a part of a community that is built on sharing knowledge and helping each other out. As almost all the informants have stated, the community plays a crucial role in them becoming a modder and advancing their skillset. This becomes problematic when considering that integrating modders into the production line, through monetary system, effectively isolates the modder from the community that in the first place made who they are. As such, the advantage that corporate actors seek to gain from integrating modders is void when the modder is turned into a developer with new values and norms for creativity. In the broader societal context, this need for individuals with knowledge and skillsets for a knowledge community to thrive, places the concept in a contextual layer where knowledge and sharing is not enough. Horizontal integration, or low-entry levels into the community through the platform or the tools that the knowledge pivots around, risks being detrimental to the complexity of the knowledge, which erases community members' reliance on each other, and in turn the community as well.

To be a modder cannot be reduced to a few characteristics of an individual but requires the concession, that being a modder also describes a unique social connection with the community and how this community constitute a state of constant feedback and learning. The moment the modder is not a part of the knowledge community, the modder becomes something else entirely. Furthermore, this study helps towards understanding audience participation and UGC in the creative industries as well as media platforms economy. The debate on free labor exploitation suggests that users should somehow be economically compensated, whereas this study suggests that it is not as much about monetary compensation as it is about nurturing the provision system and moral economy that exist between participants.

7. Conclusion

In this study, I have explored the conditions of free labor game production, more precisely modders experienced relationship with corporate actors in the digital game industry. The changing landscape of hobbyist game production has been marked by the open source movement as well as copyright laws within the creative industries, where the balance is continuously weighted by corporate actors who hold the locus control. The recent rebalancing has been studios/publisher adopting new

approaches of encapsulating modders participatory practices within more controlled environments, such as Bethesda Creation Club.

While this is one specific example, the aim has been to discover the broader relationship between modders and corporate actors.

To do this, I raised the following questions:

- What are the modders perceptions and experiences of their relationship with corporate actors?
- How do modders make sense of the strategies of value extraction, in relation to their participatory practices?
- What kind of moral reactions do these strategies provoke on the part of the modders?

In answering the first question, I investigated modders perception of their relationship with the modding community to get an understanding of their appreciations for a potential relationship. This was immediately reflected in their response to a relationship with corporate actors, in the sense that they showed desire for a more “human” relationship with corporate actors.

In answering the second question, I adopted Sayer’s concept of moral economy and Carpentiers understandings of participation. Modders showed generally a concern for the technological limitations of standardized low-entry platforms and tools, as they suffer from not appealing to modders with know-how, which makes the platform ill-suited as a knowledge community hub for sharing and learning. This is interesting in relation to the debate on participation, as it contextualizes participation as not necessarily positive in its own right, in some cases it is instead seen as being limiting and controlling. The importance of knowledge and skill, and how it formulates the foundation for the provision system and social dependency between community members, suggest participation and knowledge communities to be rather sensitive towards outsider interference, whether it holds good or bad intentions. Furthermore, the informants were generally concerned with how paid mod systems fundamentally change the values of the knowledge community to an extent that the community would not be able to survive.

In answering the third question, I analyzed respondents meaning-making of corporate strategies and how they felt this constituted their relationship with corporate actors and how they in turn react to this relationship. Modders experienced their relationship with studio/publisher to be reduced to copyright law and EULA enforcement, primarily due to limited awareness around the legal media space they traverse, which is exemplary of the importance of Carpentiers concern for not de-contextualizing participation. In most cases modders would perceive copyright law as reasonable compromise for them to practice their hobby, although the moment that corporations start capitalizing on their free labor it becomes morally wrong to the modders. In terms of reactions, the modders felt that their relationship with corporations were generally not a space for negotiation, but instead a situation of “take it or leave it”, which then became the only form of reaction from the site of the modders, that they would simply stop modding for the game.

In the contemporary world of knowledge and information economies and the increasing computer literacy, not to mention the intangible legal environment of IP; the study of UCC and UGC and how

corporations embrace it is crucial if we are to understand the environment that the average media user and producer will formulate their participation within. This is especially relevant considered the intangible nature of IP laws as opposed to traditional property such as land and goods. IP is challenged by the problem of appropriation where it is nearly impossible for individuals or small and medium-sized enterprises to protect their IP, and in most cases, they will not make that effort due to scarce awareness of the need to. Returning to the scholarly debate on UGC presented in the background, the orientation of corporations exploiting free labor and the optimistic perception of UGC appears to be holding different assumptions of corporations being in control and UGC being a positive development in its nature. I argue that these assumptions, while enriching for the debate, miss the point. Whether participation is positive or negative, exploited or not, it is in which relationship that participation occur and how it shapes different actors' engagement that is of interest, as this suggests how the conditions for participation can be negotiated in potentially exploitative or non-exploitative ways. For this reason, I consider it important to close the circle that I have drawn of modders participatory ecosystem with future studies around corporate actors' perception of their relationship with modders. As well as mod-users perception to better determine whether they in fact constitute a fourth participant in the negotiation around modders participatory practices. On the broader discussion on participation, this study identifies a knowledge gap of exploring participation in the context of a corporate interference, to better understand the intersection between moral economies and monetary economics.

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Appendix I – Interviews Questions

1. What is your nationality?
2. What is your gender?
3. What is your age?
4. How long time have you been modding?
5. What type of mods do you create primarily?
 - a. For what games?
6. What made you become a modder?
 - a. What is your motivation for modding?
7. Have you been contacted by any companies/corporate actors, due to your hobby?
 - a. What did they want?
 - b. What do you think about that?
8. Have you ever sought out companies/corporate actors, due to your hobby?
 - a. What did you want?
 - b. What response did you get?
 - c. What do you think about that?
9. Do you participate in any specific modding communities?
 - a. Why do you prefer these to others?
 - b. Are there any pros and/or cons by being in a specific community?
 - i. Please elaborate
10. Is there a difference(s) between independent and corporate created modding communities?
 - a. How many corporate created communities do you know of?
 - b. Have you experienced any other ways that game studios/publisher's attempt to maintain a relationship with modders?
11. What do you think about this/these relationship(s) between studios/publishers and modders?
 - a. What is good?
 - b. What is bad?
 - c. How could it be better?
12. Do you have anything you want to add on this topic?

Appendix II – Informants

Transcripts can be obtained by contacting the author.

<p>Informant A Gender: Male Nationality: Dutch Age: 25 Platform: Nexusmods Conducted: 17/03/2019 – 27/03/2019 Nature of Interview: Written Sampling Method: Chain</p>
<p>Informant B Gender: Male Nationality: America Age: 26 Platform: Nexusmods Conducted: 15/03/2019 – 21/03/2019 Nature of Interview: Written Sampling Method: Chain</p>
<p>Informant C Gender: Male Nationality: America Age: 58 Platform: Nexusmods Conducted: 14/03/2019 – 25/03/2019 Nature of Interview: Written Sampling Method: Convenience</p>
<p>Informant D Gender: Male Nationality: Spain Age: 23 Platform: Nexusmods Conducted: 18/03/2019 – 21/03/2019 Nature of Interview: Written Sampling Method: Convenience</p>
<p>Informant E Gender: Male Nationality: American Age: 25 Platform: Nexusmods Conducted: 28/03/2019 – 04/04/2019 Nature of Interview: Written Sampling Method: Chain</p>
<p>Informant F Gender: Male Nationality: American Age: 34 Platform: Nexusmods</p>

<p>Conducted: 24/03/2019 Nature of Interview: Oral Sampling Method: Chain</p>
<p>Informant G Gender: Male Nationality: American Age: 25 Platform: Reddit Conducted: 31/03/2019 Nature of Interview: Oral Sampling Method: Chain</p>
<p>Informant H Gender: Male Nationality: Australia Age: 28 Platform: Twitter Conducted: 09/04/2019 Nature of Interview: Oral Sampling Method: Chain</p>
<p>Informant I Gender: Male Nationality: German-Canadian Age: 60 Platform: Nexusmods Conducted: 24/03/2019 Nature of Interview: Oral Sampling Method: Convenience</p>