Chapter XXII
Modding Neverwinter Nights Into Serious Games

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“Ludologists love stories, too.”

ABSTRACT

Game Modification, or Modding, is a unique and valuable way of learning with digital games as well as a means to earn beginners’ stripes in the game design world. Beginners who emerge successful from a modding experience, having created at least one playable game, have stepped out of the comfort zone of being gamers, and shown the courage in taking on a real-world adventure. Their rewards are altogether different from having beaten the toughest boss in a game. A team of modders share a unique bond with one another as comrades, as members of a fellowship. It is an experience found, not in the retelling of ancient epics by others, but in the making of one’s own adventure. This chapter is an account of one such undertaking that shows the potential and value of game modding for education. Readers who are contemplating the use of game modding for creating serious games should find the chapter useful.

INTRODUCTION

School teachers and video games have something in common. People can usually remember their favorite teachers and what they have done; similarly, avid gamers are often able to recount their favorite video games and their favorite moments of playing. In the 30 years of video game history, titles such as Castlevania, Final Fantasy, and The Legend of Zelda were extra special because they were able to capture the hearts of many players through a blend of memorable plots and game
play. A number of games employed cinematic “cut-scenes” during game play that added realism to the game world and heightened players’ emotions. It is small wonder that these titles quickly outsold other games upon release.

Although many of these video games are of eastern (Japanese, in particular) origin, this did not mean that westerners were no good at storytelling. Bioware, Inc. based in Canada, is a video game company that prides herself on delivering “the best story-driven games in the world” to her customers (per company vision statement). Those who have played games created by Bioware (such as *Star Wars: Knights of the Old Republic*, *Jade Empire*, and *Mass Effect*) will readily attest to the memorable plot twists in these epics. (We have purposely chosen words like “written” and “epics” in attempt to describe the games created by Bioware, Inc., to commend their story-driven approach to making games.)

Among the titles developed by Bioware, Inc., it was *Neverwinter Nights* (hereafter, *NWN*) that received the highest acclaims. The games saw several official expansions and premium packs by Bioware, and other third-party developers since its debut July 2002. Although *NWN* has to be classified as an “old” game by the video game industry standard in 2008, it continued to receive strong support from the *NWN* gamers’ community. Apart from a good narrative, the success of *NWN* has much to do with Bioware’s decision to share the game development kit (GDK)—also known as the Aurora Toolkit—with the gamer community at large. Anyone who purchased the game immediately gained access to the GDK that was distributed on the *NWN* game discs.

The dissemination of the GDK to the *NWN* gamers community not only allowed the owners to create their own game content using the 3D models and resources available but also opened up the world of video game creation to casual players. Any *NWN* player with the will to learn the GDK could potentially become a (self-hired) *NWN* developer. As gamers learned how to make new game contents and shared these “home-brewed” modules with other gamers, more players became motivated to do likewise. According to the Bioware website, over 3 million copies of *NWN* were registered and nearly 5000 “home-brewed” *NWN* modules have been created since 2002 (as of May 2006). Put in another perspective: anyone who had purchased *NWN* gained instant access to 5000 playable games instantly with a single payment of $20! [Note: new game contents created using the Aurora Toolkit could only be played using a compatible game engine, in this case: *NWN*.]

**Game Modding**

The idea of making video games by modification (or game modding) is in the same vein as constructionism, or “learning by building” (Harel & Papert, 1991; Kafai, 2006; Kafai & Resnick, 1996). Whether it is in relation to game playing (Papert, 1993; Turkle, 1984), or game making (Kafai, 1994; Rieber, Luke, & Smith, 1998), the theory proposes that students attach meanings to constructed artifacts (Blumenfeld et al., 1991) in order to make sense of their own learning; in contrast to performing classroom exercises that are typically disconnected from everyday lives (Papert, 1980). When students knew the fruits of their labor (created artifacts) could be used, not for grades, but for a purpose—be it a competitive event, or showing off to friends—they became more interested and were motivated to go the extra mile in the learning process.

Wikipedia defines mod (or modification) as “computer games, especially first-person shooters, role-playing games, and real-time strategy games... made by the general public or a developer, and can be entirely new games in themselves. They can include new items, weapons, characters, enemies, models, modes, textures, levels, story lines, music, and game modes... Mods that add new content to the underlying game are often called partial conversions, while...