Modding: Changing the Game, Changing the Industry

by Caio Camargo

In every industry, there seems to have been a reversal from mainstream to local, small-time production. The film and music industries have experienced a rejection of mass-produced media in favor of independent movies and bands. It can be described as a resistance to industries that became overly concerned with sales and, oftentimes, lost touch with what made them great in the first place: their products.

The computer gaming industry seems to have struck the right balance between mainstream and grassroots efforts. Maybe it is because the abundance of online communities offers a lot of grassroots input, which puts developers in touch with their customers. It could be because developers, who are mostly gamers themselves, identify closely with the gaming community. This back-and-forth is embodied in a practice that is almost as old as computer gaming itself: modding.

Mods have been around since at least the early eighties, following the release of the original first-person shooters, and they have been an integral part of the gaming experience for many gamers ever since. Most games produced since then have had at least minimal modding capabilities. It seems that game producers understood the ability of mods to extend the possibilities—and with them, the value—of their games. The ever-popular *Counter-Strike* was originally a *Half-Life* mod, and it is probably more popular today than the original game. The creators of *Counter-Strike* gave Valve, the company that released *Half-Life*, the rights to what would become one of the most popular computer game franchises that is out today.

Many game developers are still hesitant to give modders full access to all of their tools and code, opting for more modest capabilities. With *Civilization IV*, however, Firaxis went all out, designing the game from the beginning with user modification in mind. Since the game's release in late October 2005, users have created not only a multitude of new units, buildings, civilizations, and game tweaks, but also total conversions, from the *Total Realism* mod that brings game-play closer to reality, to a mod that intends to recreate the classic *Sid Meier's Alpha Centauri* with the *Civilization IV* game engine. All of these mods have become popularized by *Civilization* fan Web sites, most notably Apolyton (**http://apolyton.net/**) and CivFanatics (**http://www.civfanatics.com/**). All of this has been thoroughly encouraged by Firaxis, with a genuine enthusiasm by the design team to see the exciting things modders do with their game.

Meet Derek Paxton. Derek is a support engineer for a software company who had zero experience in programming. With extensive guidance from the community at CivFanatics, he put together a total conversion fantasy mod called *Fall from Heaven*, under the pseudonym "Kael." *Fall from Heaven* adds elements like magic, spells, and fantastic creatures and characters to the game, with maps to suit them. While in "vanilla" *Civilization* (a term for the unmodded version), units are mostly uniform, *Fall from Heaven* puts more emphasis on individual units, like heroes in *World of Warcraft*, through an amplified system of promotions. An extremely popular mod, *Fall from Heaven* caught the eye of Soren Johnson, lead designer in the *Civilization IV* project at Firaxis, who offered Derek some internal tools that were not available to the general public yet. Having gone from total "newbie" to the sole creator of the most popular *Civilization IV* mod there is, Derek published an article in CivFanatics entitled "How to Design a Mod," with collaboration from other modders and Soren Johnson himself. Now he is working on *Fall from Heaven II*, this time with a team of amateur designers from CivFanatics.

The CivFanatics forum brings together modders who do all sorts of things, from XML programming to 3D unit design. Some users create new civilizations, while others tweak rules to change certain aspects of the game. User "Rabbit, White" designs new units and gets frequent requests from other modders to design units for their particular mods.

"I always think it's interesting to compare modders to those game companies that license a game engine from another," says Derek. "In effect they become modders and are only distinguished by the paychecks they receive." The *Age of Empires* game engine, for example, was licensed for the making of *Star Wars Galactic Battlegrounds*. These companies "are only distinguished by the paychecks they receive—and hopefully an improvement in quality, though that isn't always the case."

Yet modders still have an advantage over them: amateurism. Amateurism is essential to the modding community. Mods are created for their creators' own enjoyment and out of a communitarian spirit. Modders are always eager to try out each others' creations, offer constructive criticism, and be supportive of each other.

There is also a question of what modders can do as amateurs. Nowadays, it takes several million dollars and a team of developers and programmers to release a game. Therefore, companies that produce them are very careful about what projects they pursue and release, which constricts designers significantly. Will Wright, for example, had to design *The Sims* in secret because his project was originally rejected. *The Sims* is now at the top of the charts as the best-selling game ever.

With modding, however, there are no constraints. Without sales and profit in mind, modders have carte blanche as to what they can do creatively. They can innovate, adapt, and fill smaller niches that are not filled by big releases. Derek adapted *Civilization* for the fantasy niche, while others chose science fiction. Some made mods for specific time periods, such as WWII or the ancient Mediterranean. New playable civilizations are emerging constantly, so that everyone, from Brazilians to the Polish, can play with their own home country. The developers of *Civilization* made all of the religions in the game equal, for the purposes of not offending anyone—a worry that modders need not have: mods giving religions specific characteristics and benefits are available for download.

Civilization IV has not even been out a whole year (and the SDK much less), but there have been impressive things done with it already. Its full potential, however, is far from being realized, and many full conversions are still to be released. Sid Meier himself said that it took a few years for modding to really pick up with *Civilization II*. Fans of the series should all be eager to see what is still to come, and all gamers should hope that other game developers pick up this cue from Firaxis and open up their games even more to modding. As Derek says, "*Civ4* isn't a game you can mod. It is a game engine you can play." And its developers and gamers both have much to gain from it.

Biography

Caio Camargo is a sophomore at Yale College, currently pursuing a degree in political science. He is a computer gaming enthusiast and has been a fan of Sid Meier's Civilization since he was in fifth grade.

This article originally appeared in *Crossroads* 13.2 (Winter 2006)