Dragons, Dwarves, and Cubes: The Effect of Player Agency in Games and Game Communities

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The kind of player agency within a video game, authentic or valid, determines the way in which a player community forms around that game. The player community, in turn, through mods and other creative content based on or made in the game, then alters or redefines the form of player agency for that game. Player agency is the combination of different elements of a game's design that give players control over certain aspects of their gameplay experience. The systems that define the agency for a game are not the same across all games, but all games do allow the player some form of agency. What is critical to understand, and what I will be discussing in this paper, is that the agency a player has in a game directly impacts the communities that form around that game. In other words, the ways in which people play a game gives shape to the player communities that celebrate that game. In addition to providing the foundation for a player community, the agency within a game can be further altered by mods, which leads to a complex relationship between the player agency in a game and the modding community for that game.

In order to explain this relationship between player agency and player communities, I will first provide a definition for player agency, which I will then demonstrate by applying that definition to different games and their player communities. My definition is largely based upon the work of Adam L. Brackin, Ph.D., using his ideas on how player agency can be viewed as a spectrum between authenticity and validity. The video game examples I will provide will start at one end of the spectrum and work towards the other, beginning with the most authentic and moving towards the valid. For each of the games there will be discussion on how the player agency in the game affects the kinds of player communities that have formed around them.

Player Agency, Validity, and Authenticity

Before I get into specific examples of player agency, defining what that actually means would help us to have a better understanding of what I mean. For the purposes of this chapter, player agency is the degree to which a game allows the player to create a unique experience for themselves while playing the game. Games with a great deal of player agency will have some sort of system in place that makes sure that no one will have the same experience playing it. Most games do not have this level of agency, mainly because it is difficult to handle without making compromises in other areas of the game. The ways a game can create a level of agency can be through validity or authenticity. This model of analyzing games, developed by Adam Brackin, measures games by the degree to which they present a valid or authentic gameplay experience. It is "a spectrum between gameplay with high validity which feels right for the game one is playing, and authenticity which models reality as a simulation or serious game might" (Brackin, 2012).

Validity can be seen as the degree to which the interactivity is prioritized in a game's narrative. Games that feature a story that give the player meaningful choices and encourages them to have an emotional investment in the game can be said to be highly valid. The characters, their journey, the world they live in: all these narrative elements can heighten the emotional investment the player may want to put into a game. Their experience in the game makes them care for the path the story takes. The narrative method of creating a valid gameplay experience can be seen in games that have a branching story, letting the player see what effect their actions have on the world of the game. However, this method of depending on the narrative to engage the player in making choices only works well when the game capitalizes on strong writing. Games that promise the depth to which the player can affect the outcome of a story, then turn around and force the player into only one storyline regardless of their choices, do not provide a valid gameplay experience at all. Here, the player agency is their measure of control over what actions they can take, and how well the game can present believable reactions in the narrative to those actions. In this context, validity through narrative is the degree to which the player can interact with the game's story. Games like *Mass Effect* and *Star Wars: The Old Republic* allow for the player to progress through the

story through branching dialogue choices, making the player have an impact on what line they take throughout the game.[1]

Not all games can create validity through their narrative and story elements, since, of course, not every game has a story written out from the very beginning. Games can also create validity through their game mechanics, where the gameplay itself conveys a great deal of meaning. Games that have mechanics in place that allow the player to determine the path through the game world by making gameplay decisions, not narrative choices, can be said to have a high degree of validity through mechanics. In these games, the narrative can sometimes be implied rather than directly stated, sometimes letting the player determine the actual structure of their story, instead of having to choose between option A and option B in a dialogue tree. Valid player agency can then be defined, in such instances at least, as the depth to which player actions and gameplay affect the world of the game. Games that make it so that every action the player takes has an effect on the world of the game, while very rare, are highly valid. This is not very realistic, however, but validity is the measure of how standardized or normalized the gameplay experience is, not how realistic it may be. Games like *Spore*, where the player guides an alien species through every level of evolution, offer a highly valid experience through its mechanics. It allows the player to become deeply involved in what they do inside the game world and makes it so that the player has an impact on it as well.

With the definition of validity out of the way, we shall move on to describing authenticity. Authenticity is "a simulation which is realistic or believable at the expense of aesthetic concerns" (Brackin, 2012). Authentic games are more likely to allow the player greater interactivity within the game world, giving them a role closer to author than audience. Instead of crafting an epic story the player is then shown, an authentic game gives the player the tools to make their own story. Because of this, the story of an authentic game might not always be as epic and engaging as that of a valid game. However, by definition, an authentic game is one which is willing to forgo narrative complexity in exchange for realism in its simulation. *Guild Wars 2* is an example of an

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1. It can be argued that the *Mass Effect* series has some problems concerning the *promised* effect of choices and the *actual* effects choices have in the game. This is beyond the scope of this paper, but is important to consider when examining valid agency in games.

authentic game. Players are rewarded just as much for exploration as they are for defeating enemies, encouraging them to see as much of the world as they can, in a sense, crafting their character's story along the way.

But what about authenticity through means apart from world building and personal narrative tools? This kind of game, one that builds an authentic play experience primarily through game mechanics, is much, much rarer. What it is, in essence, is a game that gives the player not the tools to create a narrative, but the tools to create a world. Games that give the player the ultimate freedom of creation with no set goals are highly authentic. They put the player in a world that can be almost a blank slate and let the player decide what goals they wish to pursue. These games oftentimes do not have much in the way of an ending or 'win' condition, leaving the player to decide when they are done. Open ended games like *Minecraft* and *Terraria* give the player a procedurally generated world to play with, giving them the agency to create projects of their own design.

"Losing is Fun!" – Dwarf Fortress

With the definition of player agency out of the way, we shall start at the authentic side of the spectrum with the first example: *Dwarf Fortress*. First released in 2006, with development having started in 2002, *Slaves to Armok: God of Blood Chapter II: Dwarf Fortress* is an as of yet unfinished freeware game developed by one man (Tyson, 2008). The game's primary game mode, Fortress Mode, puts the player in charge of seven dwarves and is only tasked with building a mountain home in a procedurally generated world with incredibly accurate modeled geological forces. The degree to which the game tracks and simulates entities is in direct contrast to its equally simplistic graphics, as it uses ASCII to depict everything in the game. The second game mode, Adventurer Mode, allows the player to create a hero in the generated world, allowing them to explore the land, full of monsters, demons, bandits, ruins, human castles, elven forests, dwarven cities, abandoned dwarven cities, and not-so-abandoned goblin towers. The third mode of the game, Legends Mode, is less of a game mode and more of a form of record keeping. Legends mode allows the player to look at the history of everything in a world. This is not an exaggeration, *Dwarf Fortress* keeps track of

every event, including those that happen during world generation. Every "megabeast" and every kill it makes, every civilization that rises and falls, every artifact created by the player's dwarves, every relative a single dwarf has and when they married: The game keeps track of it all.

Of course, with a game so complex and simplistically displayed, the learning curve for the game turns into more of a cliff than anything else. It is unlikely for a new player to understand what the game is showing them, how to build or dig or get their dwarves to do work, or even find out why the dwarves keep dying when they pick up their "!!wolf leather shoes!!"[2] This is why there are not very many people who like *Dwarf Fortress* after their first attempt to play it. Fewer still have the patience to painstakingly learn how to play and build their mountain homes. As a reflection of the kind of authentic agency the player is given in the game, we come to how this agency influences the player community.

Because the UI and learning curve of *Dwarf Fortress* are so hard to overcome, many players turn to information resources beyond what is afforded within the game. This leads to new players entering the *Dwarf Fortress* community, through the official forums on Bay12, other forums or message boards that discuss the game, or the ever useful *Dwarf Fortress* Wiki, maintained by members of the community. These community hubs provide spaces for new players to learn from more experienced veterans, allowing the community to grow around discussion of *Dwarf Fortress*. At the time of this writing, the official Bay12 forums has 44,242 members posting about their experiences in and advice about the game, among other things (Adams, 2015). These online spaces are partially a result of the difficulty curve to *Dwarf Fortress*, pushing new players to seek outside help and resources. This, in turn, fosters growth within the communities.

But when one manages to get everything down and survive the sieges thrown out them, what is left for them to do? This is the point at which community involvement interacts with authenticity in the game's mechanics. With helpful resources and guides available to the player, more ambitious projects and challenges can be attempted,

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2. Items surrounded by exclamation points in the game are on fire.

allowing the player to exercise the potential given to them by the mechanical agency in the game.

Because the player is given the tools to build up their own fortress, the game is already authentic in terms of game mechanics. The agency afforded to the player provides them with everything they need in the way of tools except anything resembling a goal past "survive." Since the game is very authentic, it can be seen as more of a simulation than a game. Most veteran players, once they have gotten their fortress running for a few years, decide to attempt a challenge of some sort. These tend to be self-imposed, allowing the player to decide what exactly they want to accomplish. Sometimes it is a construction project, like building a huge pump stack to bring magma up to the surface, or, for the computer science majors, an analog computer made through pressure plates and logic flood gates. In some games, a player may decide to start off with a task or challenge of some sort, like pretending to be elves and never cutting down a tree or digging into the earth. While the game does not reward the player for accomplishing these challenges, the objective of the challenges is more to have fun and exercise the player's creative muscles. The game allows for a great deal of agency when it comes to such mega projects, letting the player build their own authentic gameplay experience.

Dwarf Fortress, just because it displays a great deal of authenticity in the form of its gameplay mechanics, has some valid elements to it. The validity in this case does not come from within the game itself, but from how the player community interacts with it. Because the game does not give epic meaning to any of the actions of the player, it is therefore the player's responsibility to interpret their gameplay experience as epic as it relates to them. The best examples of valid gameplay experiences come from the tales and stories shared between members of the communities. Tales such as the fortress of Boatmurdered, from the Something Awful forums, and the fortress that came after, namely Headshoots, Syrupleaf, Gemclod, and Bronzestabbed (2007, 2009, 2010, 2011, 2012). These fortresses were all succession games, where each in-game year would be played out by one person, who would post screenshots and text telling the story of their time as 'overseer' before passing the save off to the next. The threads for each of the fortresses gave rise to a great deal of participation from observers, as dwarves in the fortresses would be named after posters in the thread. This shows how validity, how

epic meaning can be given to a game like *Dwarf Fortress*, as it allows thread participants to craft a narrative for the fortress collectively, in the form of hundreds of in-character diary entries, pieces of fan art, and even fan music. Thus, the player community influences the form of agency through how they interpret and share their gameplay experiences.

While the game itself has a great deal of influence in the makeup of the community around it, the community also can change the game itself through modding. The core systems of the game are nearly impossible to edit, yet all entities the game creates are programmed in simple text files, which can be modified with a little instruction from the forums or wiki. These allow even first time programmers the chance to make their dwarves breathe underwater and swim through magma, or for goblin invaders to drop raw adamantine when their corpses are butchered. These modifications are simple and allow the player to further exert authentic agency within the game, but the mods do not end there. A common issue for many players is that it is hard to interpret the game's ASCII graphics the first time playing. There were also complaints that managing the jobs each dwarf was assigned was a pain when you had to track down each dwarf and manually set the labors they had. In response, a packaged set of mods was put together and called the "Lazy Newb Pack" (2015). Included in it is the latest version of the game, a graphics set that has more detail than just ASCII, and several utilities to make managing the fortress easier. The "Dwarf Therapist" utility allows the player to see what tasks any dwarf has assigned and change their labor settings any time they want. "StoneSense" will display the game in an isometric 3D view, although it can be a bit hard for long time players to get used to using it. These mods show how the community alters the ways in which player agency is expressed in the game, through modification of the game controls rather than the game mechanics. By modifying various aspects of the game, players increase the amount of control they have over their game play experience, creating further examples of authentic game play and creative projects to share with the rest of the community. While the game is unlikely to be finished any time soon, the game community around it will make sure that players new and old will keep playing it for a long time to come.

"Step 1: Punch Trees" – Minecraft

Moving along towards the more valid end of the agency spectrum, we transition to *Minecraft*, another game that was initially developed by a single person, Markus Persson. Until the last few years, *Minecraft* was only available through pre-order as it was still being developed. This did not stop people from playing the game, even if there were features that were yet to be implemented.

It could be said that *Minecraft* is less of a game than *Dwarf Fortress*, as, until very recently, there was no end or win conditions for the single player survival mode. Dying would just respawn the player back where they first started playing (although hardcore mode regenerates the world every time, so there is something to lose). After the world is generated and the player is put into it, there is very little that is required of them. That does not mean the player does not have to do anything, since nightfall brings monsters out to attack, and the only way to be safe is to build some sort of hovel to hide in until the morning comes. What the player does after securing themselves with food and shelter is entirely up to them. Once again, where the player has made their foundation within the game that is where the game's level of agency becomes apparent.

The gameplay in *Minecraft* is undoubtedly authentic through its game mechanics. The player is placed in a procedurally generated world and given the freedom to do what they want with the resources they gather. Just as before with *Dwarf Fortress*, the number of creative projects made in *Minecraft* is staggering. The project could be as simple as planting a garden around simple log cabin, or as expansive as a mine cart track that goes around the entire world. Some players will recreate scenes, settings, and characters from other games in the medium of cubes. Brackin mentions in his conference paper that he has recreated the movie version of Hogwarts in Minecraft (Brackin, 2012). The creative projects are not just limited to sculptures of various figures or buildings. With the addition of red stone circuits and music boxes to the game, players set out to see what could be accomplished with these new features. This has led to hundreds, if not thousands, of videos on YouTube of players re-creating songs from popular culture and other video games. Some enterprising players have programmed working calculators with digital displays through the use of red stone logic gates. The huge variety of creative endeavors that have been created using *Minecraft*

shows how the game is built around players building and sharing ideas, leading to the formation of a large community around the game.

The community for the game is much larger than that of *Dwarf Fortress*, just going by the fact that the official forums have over 3 million members, with boards dedicated to general discussion, mapping and modding, the different platforms *Minecraft* is available on, lists of servers for multiplayer, technical support, and one board for sharing creations made in the game (Minecraft Forums, 2015). Just as with *Dwarf Fortress*, making a huge tower filled with gold and diamonds means very little if you are unable to show it to other people. Within the forums, players can meet up and work together in multiplayer games to create worlds filled to the brim with huge designs and creations.

But the place where player agency and player community interact is not just in the *Minecraft* forums. Where most players of *Minecraft* go for more information and content, apart from the wikis and forums, is YouTube. YouTube channels dedicated to posting *Minecraft* videos are numerous, with the most popular channels being able to make more than just a living off of YouTube monetization. The Yogscast, in particular, has a great deal of influence on the *Minecraft* community, and further represents how the player community can shape the expression of player agency within and outside of a game.

The Yogscast, founded by Lewis Brindley and Simon Lane, are notable for creating video series set in *Minecraft* featuring the group's antics with various mods and settings. Their first series, as noted by Esther McCallum-Stewart in *Someone Off the Youtubez*, started out as recordings of their normal experiences in *Minecraft* (2014). However, they quickly realized that relying on random occurrences would not garner much popularity, so their videos began to incorporate constructed narratives to draw more viewers. The result has been a huge growth in the Yogscast channel, with more members, merchandise, and new video series being updated daily. Their success can be seen to come from how they added story elements to their gameplay experience, crafting a more valid form of their playthroughs for people to enjoy. Due to how popular they have become, a great deal of videos and channels on YouTube today all made in or use material from *Minecraft*, hopeful to make lightning strike twice and become as

successful as the Yogscast, who at the time of this writing have over 7 million subscribers on their main channel.

In this way the player community for *Minecraft* grows because of prominent members sharing very valid experiences within the game. Valid experiences which are possible because of the authentic agency already present in the game and further extended by different mods. This shows how *Minecraft* is a valuable example of how the player community can create their own forms of valid agency in a highly authentic game.

"Here There Be Saints" – Mission Based Open World Sandbox Games

Moving away from the blocky worlds of *Minecraft*, we come to not a single game but a particular genre that demonstrates a more valid form of player agency: Mission based, open world sandbox games. These games, which allow the player to explore a huge world full of quests and secrets to discover, often contain both valid and authentic elements of player agency.

The first example brings us to the fictional streets of Stilwater and Steelport, the settings for the *Saints Row* series. In this series, the concept of *Grand Theft Auto* clone is taken and made new, turning the usual formulaic gameplay into something fast paced, over the top, and fun. The *Saints Row* series shows how to turn *GTA* into a game that never takes itself seriously. *Saints Row 1* put the player in the role of the 'Playa', who joins the Third Street Saints in order to take back the city of Stilwater from three rival gangs, ultimately putting the Playa' at the top of it all before a traitor blows up the boat he is on at the end of the game. *Saints Row 2* has the player wake up from a long coma in prison, and the Saints have all but disappeared in their absence. Now faced with three new gangs that moved into Stilwater, the new Boss has to rebuild the gang and take control of the city once again. In the end, even the Ultor Corporation, who control the city from the shadows, cannot stop the Saints, and by the end of the game the Saints own Stilwater. *Saints Row The Third* starts off with the Boss and the Saints at the top of their game, with merchandising and TV deals making them worldwide celebrities. However, their fame brings the attention of the Syndicate, who want a cut of the profits. After negotiations fall through, and a gunfight erupts on a Syndicate plane, the Boss

ends up falling right into Steelport, surrounded by the Syndicate and its allies. Of course, by the end of the game, after causing mayhem and destruction on a scale beyond the first two games, the Saints own Steelport. *Saints Row IV* starts out with the Saints as leaders of the free world, with the player taking control of the President before an alien invasion captures and imprisons them in a virtual replica of Steelport. After breaking the simulation and defeating the head of the invasion, there is nothing left but the stars themselves for the Saints to conquer.

What is important to note about this series is the authenticity present in the systems for customization. Throughout the games, a core feature has been the ability to customize the player character, with options to change their clothes, walking animation, taunts, and even their voice in the latter three games. The character creation system is very deep, allowing for a great deal of uniqueness for every Boss the player creates. From *Saints Row 2* onwards, the games also feature drop in co-op for players to show off their fashion skills while detonating large chunks of the city. This agency to customize the player's personal character is very authentic, yet the structure of the game remains valid, as the story is very linear. However, the game does not force the player to have to complete all the missions in a game at once. After the tutorial missions in any of the four games, the player is then free to decide what they want to do in the city. They can choose which rival gang to fight by starting the next mission in their particular line, or they can explore the city and find side missions and diversions to earn money and respect. *Saints Row 1* and *2* had the main story missions require the player to first earn enough respect before they could start the mission, while *Saints Row The Third* and *IV* have respect act as a form of experience points, allowing the player to unlock abilities by paying a certain amount of respect and cash. Respect could be earned through completing missions, performing stunts in a vehicle, displays of skill in gun fights, or various diversions and activities throughout the city. A staple activity in all of the games, for example, is Insurance Fraud, where the player is tasked with racking up a certain amount of insurance money for bogus injuries. In order to make the bogus injuries, the player has to throw themselves into traffic as a ragdoll, bouncing from car to car, building up a multiplier the longer they stay in the air. This is only one activity

out of many others, giving the player the agency to pick what they want to do at any time, and always rewarding them for the fun things they can do.

With a game so popular, it is no wonder that the player community for the series is so large. The main website for the series features forums for all four games, where players can discuss and share their experiences with others. A popular feature for the third game is the ability to share the results of the character creation tool, showcasing the community's favorite looks for the Boss and allowing anyone with the appropriate version of the game (console or PC) to download them for their own use. Being able to show off the talent someone puts into customizing their Boss allows for the community to come together, allowing for the players to meet others and play together. The player can have fun when their Boss, looking like an obese clown or a tactical soldier, hijacks a car before plowing through a crowd of enemies, or they could have a party when their co-op buddy, looking like famed PBS painter Bob Ross, comes in with an attack copter. These customization tools give players the desire to play together and show off their creative side while having fun. This form of agency can be seen as both valid and authentic, as it feels right for the world the game is set in and gives a set of tools for the player to alter their gameplay experience.

Of course, with a series so over the top that the second game had an activity called "Septic Avenger," what could possibly be missing?[3] Going by the fact that the modding community for the series is very active, several things could be. While the console versions are harder to crack open and modify without specialized tools and programs, the PC version of all four games can be changed with some technical know-how. Most mods expand on the already large number of customization options in the games, giving players the options of more hairstyles, skin tones, and other attributes for their characters. For the second and third games, each has a set of mods that has been put together to make a popular expansion to the gameplay experience. For *Saints Row 2*, the "Gentlemen of the Row" super mod contains more clothing items, more vehicles, new weather features, customization options for planes and boats, new weapons, new cribs, new gang members and gang styles, new music for the radio, and countless other

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3. The player was tasked with bringing property values down by using a septic truck with a turret-mounted hose.

additions to the game. The "Gentlemen of Steelport" mod for *Saints Row The Third* features many of the same types of add-ons, as well as mission replay and the ability to turn off tutorial pop-ups (Idolninja, 2012). These mods give the player greater ability and agency in customizing their personal gameplay experience. Thus, by extending the degree to which the player has over their aesthetic aspects of the story of *Saints Row*, the overall gameplay experience becomes much more valid. The sense of mayhem and destruction on a grand scale is made so much more astounding when the player has the agency to make their character look like whatever they could want or imagine.

Another good example of the mission based, open world sandbox game is the *Elder Scrolls* series. For the purposes of this paper, focus will be dedicated to three games in the series: *The Elder Scrolls III: Morrowind* (2002), *The Elder Scrolls IV: Oblivion* (2006), and *The Elder Scrolls V: Skyrim* (2011). *The Elder Scrolls* series is set in the fantasy world of Nirn, primarily on the continent of Tamriel, with each entry into the series taking place within different parts of that continent. All three games feature expansive open locales, populated with creatures and characters that the player interacts with in order to complete quests and uncover more of the history behind the world. The games are first-/third- person action RPGs, with real time combat that includes a blend of melee, ranged, and magical attacks and abilities.

The player character in all three games is the first point where the kind of player agency becomes apparent. In all three of these games, the protagonist is a blank slate that the player creates when starting the game, picking from different races, backgrounds, and other traits that determine their starting skills and appearance. Additionally, the player character is brought to the setting for each game as a prisoner that is then released[4] into the open world to explore and confront the evil forces that threaten the land. As the player progresses through the game, they are offered a great deal of side quests and missions unrelated to the main one, and there is no time limit that forces them to complete the main quest at any point. All of these mechanical systems create a form of agency that is mechanically authentic and narratively valid. By giving the player the choice of where to go, who to work for, and what quests to pursue,

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4. The method of their release differs between the three games: In *Morrowind* they are pardoned in order to join a secret order sworn to the Emperor, in *Oblivion* they are a prisoner who is in the cell that the Emperor has a secret escape tunnel in and goes along with him, and in *Skyrim* they are on their way to their execution before a dragon attacks and they escape in the chaos.

the player has authentic agency over their mechanical progression in the games. By incorporating these systems into the narrative of the game, through the use of an undefined player-protagonist, the games provide a more valid experience to the player, as it puts their character at the center of the major events within the games. Therefore, the form of agency the player has in these three games can be considered a combination of both authentic and valid elements, with mechanics that feel right for the world the game has created and provided a way for the player to have some control of the outcome of that world.

Since *Morrowind, Oblivion,* and *Skyrim* have very similar forms of player agency, it is unsurprising that the player communities for them are based around similar activities. The most active element of the *Elder Scrolls'* communities, and what they initially focused on, is the creation, distribution, and discussion of mods. The Nexus, one of the primary hubs for mods for the games, hosts 3,390 files for *Morrowind* (Scott, 2015a), 27,682 for *Oblivion* (Scott, 2015b), and 41,360 for *Skyrim* (Scott, 2015c), with the total number of downloads for all three combined over 800 million (Scott, 2015d). These mods cover a wide range of content, from new objects, creatures, abilities, and other content, to entirely new quests, locations, systems, and forms of gameplay. With such a network like the Nexus in place, it becomes easier for players to find and share their favorite mods, which can have an effect on their overall gameplay experience. Depending on the kinds of mods that a player decides to use, their experiences playing an *Elder Scrolls* game will be completely different from what they would experience without them.

The developers behind *The Elder Scrolls* series, Bethesda Game Studios, understand that being able to mod a game is appealing to their players, which they took into consideration when designing *Skyrim*. In an interview by Kotaku with *Skyrim* game director Todd Howard, Howard commented that, while working on *Skyrim* the team, "started feeling like, mods are so cool, we need to do more to make sure more people are trying them out" (Hamilton, 2012). This is why *Skyrim* was one of the first games not made by Valve on Steam to feature Steam Workshop support. Steam Workshop, a system that provides tools for creating, finding, and sharing mods for certain games on Steam, is another way in which the player community is able to change the form of agency in a game. Together with the Nexus, these systems provide a space for the player

community to continue to modify and reevaluate the forms of agency provided by the games they play.

What Can We Learn from This?

Now that we have finished our examination of each game by itself, we shall conclude by discussing what is important to take away from these examples. Overall, it can be seen that, for any game that allows it, an active modding community will form a cornerstone of the community around the game. Modding adds a great deal of replay value, as well as making the ties between individuals in the community stronger through shared ideas.

The degree of player agency within a game, regardless whether it is more valid or authentic, is almost always increased by the additions made by mods from the community. This makes sense simply because, if a player enjoys a game in spite of whatever they may find as a flaw in the game, they will play it even more if there is a mod that addresses that need. The mods do not always have to radically alter the way the game is played, as in *Minecraft*, where many mods simply change the textures displayed, in order for the mod to be popular. For games that are more authentic, mods that add additional tools in order to extend complexity or player influence in the game are most often going to be the favorite mods of that game's community. Even mods that only feature utilities that organize and present the same information in a different format than the game will be useful, such as the "Dwarf Therapist" utility in the "Lazy Newb Pack" for *Dwarf Fortress*. These allow for the player to understand and analyze their situation in the game faster, making it easier for them to plan out and build creative projects more efficiently.

When a game begins to garner attention and players experiment with creative projects within the game, the formation of a community of players increases the degree to which players share these projects. Whether the game is valid or authentic, allowing or encouraging players to share their custom ideas and creations solidifies the community. This in turn makes new players more likely to attempt such creative ventures, thus making sure that players exercise their agency within the game to the

fullest. Communities that promote cooperation also extend the degree of player agency, by allowing players to share and plan ideas. This could be as simple as letting players share their Boss in *Saints Row The Third*, to large joint efforts in running a fortress with several other players in *Dwarf Fortress*, cooperating with other modders on the Nexus or Steam Workshop to put together a mod pack for *Skyrim*, or filling an entire world with buildings in a server running *Minecraft.*

For game designers, studying what elements of games people most enjoy is a key part of designing a game. Learning what players would do when given agency in certain ways allows us to predict how popular a game might be. As we have seen here, the degree of player agency that proves to be popular is dependent on whether the game is more valid or authentic. Authentic games benefit from agency that affects the world of the game at a mechanical level, while valid games are better suited for a kind of agency that promotes personal expression through aesthetic choices. Whatever the case may be, we can only look ahead to see what the future may hold for video games. Well, while we aren't busy with building underground settlements, exploring the Nether, or cruising around the city with a buddy.

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