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Article

Mod as a shared zone for games and players to exercise agency: Take Stardew Valley as an example

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Abstract: In the domain of public management, the concept of agency refers to the capacity of individuals or groups to effectively utilise power and resources to achieve certain goals. The formation of agency is significantly influenced by the external institutional environment and how actors perceive social structures. Thus, the agency to win a game can be generated as players familiarise with the game's operations and understand the story line. But beyond this, there are also players who make mods on a non-profit basis, modifying the game's program to meet the needs of others. mods, as a form of patching, are different from other fan-created mediated texts. Therefore, studying the agency in gaming community management, where both players and developers interact, offers valuable insights for understanding how to promote public participation, innovation, and effective governance in the context of public management. This approach bridges the gap between the digital world and real-world public management practices.

Keywords: public management; agency; mods; game; social structures

1. Introduction

1.1. Authors and readers of texts

The relationship between the creator and the reader of a text has long been a topic of discussion. Roland Barthes, in The Death of the Author, mentioned the importance of the interpretation of the text, in which he believed that the text, as a "multidimensional space", consists of countless discourses. It is only on the side of the reader that the "totality of the text" can be revealed (Barthes and Dove, 1977). In a further clarification of the definition of authorship, Foucault defines the "authorial function" as the way in which certain discourses exist, circulate and operate in society. It organises the free dissemination, reproduction, decomposition, construction and reconstruction of the fictions. In contrast to Barthes's definition of the author as a subject that is bound to 'die', he emphasises the 'instability' of the authorial function, which may constrain and guide the reader's understanding of the text, but may also disappear at any time.

And today, in addition to the literary texts with which they are concerned, the types of texts have gained extension, so that anything produced by a subject, with a certain representational meaning, and capable of transmitting a certain value can be regarded as a mediated text (Fu and Zhao, 2022).

On this basis, Michel de Certeau has developed the concept of the "textual poacher", which summarises the relationship between the reader and the writer as "an ongoing struggle for ownership of the text and control of its meaning" (de Certeau, 2011). He stresses that the readers interpret, dismantling and restructuring the text on

their own terms, in order to produce meanings that are relevant to themselves. While this may seem to focus on the participation of the readers, it also suggests the powerful presence of an "authorial function" that attempts to constrain the interpretation of the texts in opposition to them.

The dominating power is a new aspect that John Fiske draws out that affects the creation and interpretation of texts. The power that emerges from the confrontation between the masses and the dominating power is divided into two types, social power and symbolic power, symbolic power determines the reuse of cultural industrial goods by the masses to create pleasure, meaning and resistance to the dominating power, which is the creation of pop culture (Hills, 2013). His views on pop culture were inherited by Henry Jenkins and developed into the concept of "participatory culture", which is used to represent the new style of media culture that actively creates and disseminates contents through a certain kind of identity on the Internet platform (Jenkins, 2012).

Differences in the extent of the public's right to utilise interpretations of texts have given birth to the categorisation of text types: open texts and closed texts. Open text has been described as challenging the reader to "make a series of interpretive choices that, while not infinite, are more than one choice" (Eco, 1979) whereas in the description of closed text, Eco argues that its key feature is that it is "designed to evoke a familiar response". And it also referred to the term Kristeva uses, the analogy of the "Italian stage" with the closed text in order to show that it evokes familiar responses by disguising the author's productive activity and convincing the audience that they are in agreement with him (Kristeva, 1970).

On this basis, Matt Sears further subdivided the modes of text production: native digital versus analogue restoration, analogue versus transformative, informal versus formal text production, and explicit versus implicit text production (Hills, 2013). In the latter two, the relationship between text producers and readers is more complex: fan letters are more likely to belong to the fan community when unpublished, and to official texts after publication; in the case of setting an idol's photo as the avatar of one's own social platform, it is the result of a combination of users' intrinsic motivation and the platform's interactive interface and service design.

According to Seiwald (2021), these derivatives, which are related to the text in formal and functional dimensions and are all capable of making the text visible to its audience in some way, are termed paratexts. The concept of paratext is much broader than that of user-created content, and as compared to categorising a type of text, the more important significance of the proposal of paratext is that it highlights an attribute that has a threshold function which all texts may carry more or less (Švelch, 2020).

In response to the proliferation of new media texts, Espen Aarseth employs literary theory to examine the relationship between cybertexts and their readers. He theorizes that when powerful metaphors in a text shape a critic's view, the "correct" reading divides the text's meaning into linear narrative tracks that the reader is forced to follow. However, cybertexts themselves can be conceptualized as labyrinths or imaginary worlds that readers are free to explore at will (Aarseth, 1997). In other words, despite the potential influence of the authors' metaphoric elements on the reader's decision-making process, cybertexts facilitate a range of interpretative perspectives and choices (Seiwald, 2023). It is evident from this that the study of

textual genres has increasingly focused on the novel characteristics of new media—such as online platforms—highlighting that the creation of texts is driven not only by inherent narrative impulses but also by the diverse agencies involved.

1.2. Humans and non-human agency

In *Encoding and Decoding in the Television Discourse*, Stuart Hall presented the encoding/decoding model, which suggests that the decoders, as consumers of the text, are able to interpret the information provided by the sender according to their own experiences and cultural backgrounds. For the same content, different receivers may produce dominant reading, negotiated reading, and oppositional reading interpretations (Hall, 2007).

Following Hall's exploration of how an individual's background affects the understanding of texts, Espen Aarseth writes that a cybertext is a game world and its readers are players or gamblers. He defines text as a machine for the production and consumption of linguistic symbols, and the machine is incomplete without a human being as its operator (Aarseth, 1997). Sewell (1992) argues that agency means that a human being can somehow control the social relations of the society of which he is a part. Similarly, Duff (2021) believes that agency is the ability of people to choose, control, and self-regulate in order to achieve their goals. However, there is no clear definition of the social relations, or structures, that are affected by agency, and Sewell sees it as "a cognitive metaphor that underlies the discourse of the social sciences and the sciences". But it is still not clear why it suggests that people have the potential to change their environment (Sewell, 1992).

Regarding the origin of agency, Margaret Archer argues that in the process of interacting with structures, individuals engage in constant internal conversation to understand and reflect on social structures, which leads to the reflexive realm. Agency arises as a result of a combination of the person's position within the social structure and the way in which they understand it (Archer, 2007).

In the process of forming the "ego", the individual goes through the process of moving from playing the role of an "important other" to the role of a social character. Try to see themselves in terms of several important others and summarise them as 'generalised others' who symbolise the expectations of groups or societies. It can be seen that different stages of life, as well as different positions in the social structure, influence the identity of the individual (Mead, 2015). Identity is not exclusive as a temporary basis for subject positions constructed in discourse practice. But in ideological terms, it gives a person a singular sense of who they are and where they belong (Gee, 2005).

In addition to upbringing and macro-social environment, agency also arises from an individual's understanding of the workings of social structures. Understanding is not a unilateral projection of objects by the subject, but a process of dialogue and creative fusion of horizons in a broad sense (Gadamer, 2013). Achieving understanding in the consumption of cultural products requires both parties to find and create a common language, which means besides the individuals themselves, texts, special arrangements, and artifacts act and persons that make a difference in a situation can all be considered as agents. Cooren illustrates non-human agency by introducing

the phenomenon of human actors manipulating non-human objects to speak (Cooren et al., 2013). As mentioned earlier in Matt Hills's argument, although it is the users' personal decision to use their idol's photo as their avatar, the avatar's position, the style of the photo frame, and the UI design of the platform in general all suggest what decision the users should make. And in paper titled '*From Avatar to Actant: Player Agency, Identity Transformation, and Posthuman Play in Baldur's Gate 3*,' Mi (2025) presents a compelling example that provides strong support for his argument. Despite the fact that the game offers players the opportunity to create avatars and change their appearance, a significant portion of the player population feels that their autonomy in configuring their avatars is somehow limited.

Player agency has been a widely discussed and highly controversial topic, Cage (2013) mentions that in addition to being able to control the avatar's activities and movements, games give players the illusion of agency. Despite being told that they can change the direction of the plot, all they can do is choose one of several options given by the designers. In response to the increasing diversity of game content, Cole and Gillies (2019) propose a more specific classification of the four types of player agency: fictional, mechanical, actual and interpretive. They provide detailed examples of how these types combine to give players the illusion of freedom within the constraints of the game.

2. Methodology

This study applies qualitative text analysis to investigate how mod creation manifests player agency in *Stardew Valley*. We compiled a dataset of 22,000 mods from Nexus Mods (28 May), which supports over 40 million users and hosts mods for more than 3000 games. The raw dataset uses 26 Nexus categories—e.g., "Gameplay Mechanics," "Expansions," "Cheats," "Modding Tools," "Visuals and Graphics," and "New Characters"—a gamer-centric scheme that yields redundancy (e.g., duplicate translations and compatibility patches).

To streamline analysis, we re-coded each mod using Champion's five-fold typology: art mods, skins, tools, total conversions, and game conversions (Champion, 2013). From this re-coded corpus, we found that 7723 content mods were categorised as art mods and game conversions, extending gameplay beyond cheats or visuals. These mods were evaluated using two objective filters: popularity (endorsements/downloads) and agency relevance (degree of narrative or systemic transformation). Two case studies were selected for further analysis:

1) *Stardew Valley Expanded* (SVE) by FlashShifter, the flagship total conversion with 172,461 endorsements and millions of downloads, ranking in the top percentile. Its exceptional reach makes SVE the definitive large-scale expansion for studying community-driven agency.
2) Emyn's Diverse Ginger Island (and *Pride Parade*) by yishaqeni, a single-author art mod focused on narrative enrichment. With 6100 and 5400 downloads respectively—among the highest in "Characters" and "Dialogue"—these mods exemplify targeted interpretive interventions.

All coding and selection were performed manually in spreadsheets to ensure transparency and replicability. Metadata, changelogs, and category tags were logged

with analytical memos. No personal data were collected; as only publicly available content was used, formal IRB approval was not required. By combining Nexus's dataset, Champion's framework, and clear popularity thresholds, our methodology provides a reproducible foundation for examining mod-driven agency in *Stardew Valley*.

3. Analysis

3.1. Mods depend on games to be produced and exist

Whether it's adding content, modifying appearance or cheating, the common purpose of all mods is that they can have the desired effect on the game's content in a way that the game itself doesn't provide. Consequently, if the game is unable to respond appropriately to mods when they are run, then mods won't matter. The 'uncertainty' of the game forms an important part of its appeal, and it is only when the player wants to get some kind of feedback from the game， they have the agency to complete the challenges it offers using either tacit or cheating means, even if sometimes they are not sure what the feedback will be (Loudoun et al., 2024). In *Stardew Valley*, for example, if a player cheats to get to the top of the peak on the game map before achieving "perfection", they will be chastised and chased away by the NPC Mr Qi.

Attempts to use cheat codes to obtain items will provoke a reserved response from the author. These unexpected responses create a humorous effect, and also imply that the game designers are tolerant of such behaviours.

Creator yishaqeni mentions the potential colonialist elements in *Stardew Valley* (2016) by quoting from an article by jojaqualityheadcanons when explaining the mod he created. Especially after the 1.5 update added the new map Ginger Island, while the lack of diversity in the pre1.5 content is more of a missed opportunity, the 1.5 content is actively harmful and hurtful (jojaqualityheadcanons, 2021). Ginger Island is based on a volcanic island in the tropical Pacific Ocean, and has no native inhabitants other than dwarves. New NPCs that players can meet on the island including Professor Snail, who is an archaeologist, and Betty and Leo, survivors of a shipwreck, are all white and have seemingly legitimate reasons for being on Ginger Island. And the game has set up the player's identity as a farmer living in *Stardew Valley* (2016), an outsider to Ginger Island. After relying on farming to gain some assets, they are led by a fisherman to an island with no owners. *Stardew Valley* (2016)'s simulation genre, and farm-based gameplay in fact act as a filter, making it appeal mostly to Achievers and Explorers types of players. Ginger Island, as a 1.5 update, is closely linked to previously released content, causing players who are already accustomed to farming to look forward to new crops and more space to grow them rather than disruptive changes. This "expectation" was determined by *Stardew Valley* (2016)'s filtering and influencing and by the players themselves, suggesting that the game has a role to play in influencing players' thoughts, which can be seen as a form of non-human agency (Cooren et al., 2013). For players from tropical island nations, if they want to enjoy the post 1.5 game, they are forced to adopt a unified, outsider's perspective on the reality of the places they are familiar with, even if such a perspective seems arrogant

and inauthentic in comparison to their experiences as natives. In Ginger Island, for example, the player hires parrots through "golden walnuts" and trades them for other items from a blue parrot and a frog. To the average players, this seems no different than buying something from the shop in Pelican Town, and the more animalistic NPCs are in line with Ginger Island's natural ecosystem. But jojaqualityheadcanons (2021) from the Philippines pointed out that the parrots and frogs in fact serve exactly the same role as human NPCs in the game, and are also accepted for bartering, just like the islanders, and can even teach Leo how to cook. But the authors of the game set them up as animals that don't accept gifts and can't be socialised. People of colour have been compared to animals and treated like animals to dehumanize them and justify their oppression.

Before a message can have an effect, fulfil a need, or be useful, it must first be seen as a meaningful discourse and in a meaningful way (Hall, 2007). Only decoded meaning can bring about effect and impact. Thus, simply adding a tropical, exotic island map to the game will not offend the players. The reason why yishaqeni was upset about the content of Ginger Island, and modified the original narrative of the indigenous people by creating a mod, is that the author's system of symbols used to describe the place conflicted with the social norms of thought and behaviour in the player's environment. In other words, the agency of yishaqeni and other players to create mods arises from the fact that they are tied to and inextricably linked to the gameplay and presentation in the original *Stardew Valley* (2016). At the same time, the objective property of the mod as a patching programme also dictates that it does not exist independently from the original work. Such as drawings, novels that merely steal some of the symbols of the mediated text, and so on, these works can form narratives on their own, because based on traditional texts, their story lines are relatively linear. But the narrative of the game, in cybertext, is embodied as a pile of codes, or a structure, which makes it difficult to be supplemented or replaced in any way other than by the game itself. Whether it's beautifying the environment, reducing the difficulty, or even developing a new story line, it's like a parasite that is necessarily based on the existing game text.

3.2. Games rely on mods to be expanded and survive

Video games are often promoted as a medium for multilinear narratives, allowing players to make meaningful choices that affect the outcome of the narrative (Stang, 2018). Providing users with a sense of free will in the story world has long been cited as the ultimate goal of interactive narrative methods.

In order for an objective structure or cultural property to exert its causal power, that power must be activated by an Agent (Archer, 2007). It also means that Agency is a subjective experience that changes over time and is an important driving force in realising the narrative of the game (Grodal, 2013). When enabling the player's actions and choices successfully exerts an influence on the game, they gain the fulfilment of their desire for agency, gaining greater freedom compared to the receiver of any mediated text in history. When agency is impeded, players can experience negative feelings of being ignored and objectified (Johnson, 2015).

Thus, one of the criteria for whether a game-generated narrative is valid, and whether it succeeds in telling a good story, is whether it succeeds in enabling the production of players' agency. Agency here is diverse, when exploring the meta-synthesis of agency in game studies, Jenning distinguished between 'illusory' and 'real' agency. Illusory agency can be understood as a design strategy. Like in *Stardew Valley*, players seem to have the choice to interact with and marry their favourite NPCs, yet all they can do is click on them to chat or give gifts. The 'freedom' is just an illusion; games merely invite players to participate in interactions (Charles, 2009).

Archer (2007) conceptualizes agency in three dimensions: the objective realm, which propels action toward anticipated outcomes; the subjective realm, which draws on existing skills and entitlements; and the reflexive realm, which mediates between structure and agency. In gameplay, players are typically immersed in narrative operations, engaging with the game's internal logic without critical distance. Reflexivity emerges primarily during non-narrative, manipulative behaviors, wherein players reflect on or critique the game—often through fan community discourse, attempts to influence developers, or mod creation (Aldred and Greenspan, 2011). Beyond goal-oriented play, games also generate pleasure through uncertainty, such as that found in dueling, gambling, or cooperation with strangers. This engagement with unpredictability, termed "striving play," underpins the game's motivational structure. Mod creation and use—whether to share experiences or explore new challenges—embody this striving play, revealing that modifications are not only a product of player creativity but also an intrinsic outcome of the game's motivational design (Nguyen, 2025).

Even the most popular games rarely sustain player engagement beyond two years. Beyond the loss of novelty, a significant reason for this decline lies in the finite scope of the game itself—most players eventually complete its core content, exhausting the available narrative and system interactions. As the game ceases to offer new experiences, feelings of novelty and satisfaction diminish. In this stage, players increasingly shift their focus toward community engagement—discussing, evaluating, and comparing the game—where reflexive forms of agency begin to emerge. Rather than passively accepting the game's structure, players become aware of their own interpretations and develop a desire to modify the game according to their personal perspectives and values. This process reflects what Sotamaa (2010) identifies as a core motivation for mod creation: to repair perceived shortcomings and to express the self. Modding not only revitalizes gameplay by providing new content and challenges for veteran players, but also extends the commercial lifespan of the game. High-quality mods can generate ongoing interest and even launch revenue, making them a critical mechanism for both cultural longevity and economic sustainability.

Stardew Valley Expanded (SVE), one of the game's most popular mods, illustrates how modders draw directly from the framework of *Stardew Valley*. SVE expands the game's map and enriches underdeveloped characters, such as Morris, the JojaMart manager. In the original game, Morris is a non-giftable NPC—he can neither be given gifts nor develop relationship with—and is portrayed as a flat character, the representative of JojaMart. His limited interactions and negative depiction as a profiteer serve the author's intention of encouraging players to choose to renovate the community center rather than join Joja.

SVE reinterprets Morris by adding dialogue, routines, and preferences, depicting him as a workaholic who genuinely believes in Joja's mission but struggles socially due to his rigid expectations. This version retains original traits while offering a more nuanced, humanized portrayal. Other additions, such as Suki (the traveling cart owner) and the Joja cashier, are also extensions of original figures (TimeShade, 2024). These examples demonstrate how the canon provides narrative gaps that inspire mod authors to reimagine and elaborate upon the original text, positioning the game itself as the creative foundation for mod development.

The developer of *Stardew Valley Expanded* (SVE), known as FlashShifter, publicly announced their invitation to assist in the development of *Stardew Valley*'s 1.6 update, exemplifying how mod communities can serve as a talent pool for ongoing game development. While FlashShifter clarified that their role was advisory and that no existing *SVE* content would be directly incorporated, several features in the update reflect clear conceptual influence from the mod. Notably, the addition of carrots—absent from the base game but present in SVE—was widely interpreted by the community as mod-inspired. In version 1.6, carrots not only function as a new crop but also grant horses a temporary speed boost when fed, illustrating how the game indirectly integrates mod-derived ideas to expand its mechanics and content.

Furthermore, the 1.6 update has been purported to contain a lot of additional content that is believed be inspired by player-created mods. For instance, the creation of new maps and landscapes such as the Calico Desert and the Witch's Swamp was an important part of the game's updates, and as early as 2020, mods such as *Ridgeside Village* and *Downtown Zuzu* were released by creators to expand the game's scenarios. Even in the 1.6 update, the developers added a waterfall that had already appeared in the Hot Springs Farm mod. Whether it was influenced by the mod or not, the change at least shows that mods can respond to player needs at a rate that game creators can't match.

4. Conclusions

The origins of modding tools can be traced to the 1986 *Boulder Dash Construction Kit*, which first empowered players to create custom levels within developer-supplied constraints. Throughout the 1990s, commercial titles increasingly bundled dedicated editors—culminating in the 1999 *Half-Life* Mod Expo—to acknowledge mod production as a legitimate form of user creativity (Burger-Helmchen and Cohendet, 2011). Today, official platforms, expansion packs, and even developer invitations to community authors underscore the deep interweaving of game affordances and player innovation: mod-creation tools once held exclusively by developers are now also authored by the community or player themselves.

This historical trajectory suggests that while the expansion and diversification of modding culture have been propelled largely by player communities, the *originating force* behind mod production lies within the game itself. The structure, openness, and affordances of the game text generate the conditions for creative intervention. With the growth of the gaming community and the maturation of the gaming industry, they catalyze modding behaviors that, in many cases, are ultimately reintegrated into the evolving game ecosystem. This logic is also reflected in Scacchi's analysis, where he

classifies not only software mods but also hardware modifications and cheats as part of the broader modding phenomenon (Scacchi, 2010). What distinguishes such forms is their overt reliance on game-encoded challenges—such as the desire to win—as the primary driver for modification. In all cases, the impetus to mod emerges not in opposition to the game, but from within its structure and affordances.

In the realm of interactive digital texts, game authors have increasingly recognized the potential of user-generated content, particularly mods, as a means to expand their game's reach and enhance player engagement. Developers are increasingly leveraging the inherent dependency of original game code on mods to integrate and engage mod creators, thereby enriching the gaming experience and solidifying their player base.

Players perceive this partnership as a collective authorship experience, where both original creators and modders collaboratively shape the game's evolving narrative. Consequently, the original game text becomes a living document, continuously learning from and integrating modded content that enhances its depth and complexity.

This approach reflects a broader trend in the gaming industry, where the boundary between creator and consumer is increasingly blurred, leading to a more participatory and dynamic gaming experience. Game authors can continuously merge modified content into the official narrative, thereby acknowledging the contributions of mod creators and creating a collaborative environment that fosters a sense of community within the game ecosystem.

Mods requiring the original game's code to function creating a unique ecosystem where the relationship between the game, mods, and players is symbiotic. Platforms like Nexus provide "modding tools" that facilitate compatibility between various mods and the base game, addressing the technical challenges that can arise. Such tools are crucial for sustaining a vibrant modding community, which, in turn, contributes to the longevity and dynamism of the original game.

A pertinent example of this strategy is found in the community surrounding *Stardew Valley*. After the release of version 1.4, players began modifying older mods to ensure compatibility with the updated gameplay. In response, the game's developer published a mod migration guide alongside the 1.5 update, demonstrating a deliberate effort to engage with modders and incorporate their feedback (ConcernedApe, 2021). By aligning the game updates with the desires of mod creators, the developer not only acknowledges their contributions but also effectively co-opts their innovations into the official game narrative.

As a middle ground between gamers and developers negotiating interpretive power, mods embody both the expectations of engaged players and the ongoing creative response from original authors. While often seen as forms of rebellion or subversion—what some may call "cheating"—mods simultaneously express deep appreciation for the game's narrative depth and design sophistication. They function as acts of co-authorship, where the boundaries between consumer and creator become increasingly porous.

In this negotiated space, players do not merely consume content but actively reshape it. Player agency extends beyond in-game choices to the design and dissemination of modifications—transformative practices that recast the game itself

as an evolving, participatory text. Mod communities—especially those anchored on platforms such as Nexus Mods and Steam Workshop—provide the technical and discursive infrastructure for this creativity to flourish. Through collaborative documentation, compatibility tools, rating systems, and discussion forums, participants co-create and refine game patches as contributions to a shared cultural resource (Lee et al., 2021).

Furthermore, this participatory ecology exemplifies distributed governance: bugs are identified and addressed collectively, and wish-list discussions between modders and developers operate as bottom-up feedback loops, often informing official updates. These dynamics suggest that modding is not a peripheral activity but a central force in the life cycle of contemporary games. It sustains player engagement, fosters innovation, and reconfigures authorship as a dynamic process shared between studios and communities. In this sense, mods exemplify a broader transformation in digital culture—one where agency is both individual and collective, and where the boundaries of the game are constantly redrawn through play.

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