



Dipartimento di Scienze Politiche *Cattedra Sociologia della Comunicazione*

Abstract: Il contenuto
videoludico generato
dagli utenti fra imprese e
nuovi mercati

RELATORE

CANDIDATO

Prof. Michele Sorice

Roberto Cialfi
Matr. 063232

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Abstract

Introduction

The objective of this study is to understand how a type of *User Generated Content (UGC)* in video game, the mod, is going to reshape the roles of consumers and producers, and how the community of gamers is becoming a strategic resource, able to create these products, by continually opening the meaning of the games they love through manipulation.

The result of the collaboration between corporations and communities is an exponential expansion in the life cycle of the game and a positive market positioning of the brand. In this way the businesses can prove to be able to listen to and interpret the demand of the fans on the web. Moreover, these can become a recruiting ground for members of the development teams, demonstrating their skills and imagination in the creation of these conversions¹.

Chapter 1 - A theoretical introduction

In Chapter 1, I carry on a theoretical analysis of the video games, starting from the definition of the medium to the delineation of the object of analysis: the mod, a short word for modification.

We can start our journey taking into account the definition of the sociologist F. Colombo. He thinks that the media are socio-technical devices that play a mediating role in the communication between subjects, (Colombo 2003). Since the video game has got all the three characteristics which, according to F. Colombo, are necessary to define it as a media, 1) is both a socio-technical system and 2) a mediator 3) between social subjects; in conclusion the video game is clearly a medium.

Following this, in order to understand what a video game is exactly, I use the definition

¹ Conversion is another word for the term modification or mod.

by J. Juul and its classic game model: "A game is a rule-based formal system with a variable and quantifiable outcome, where different outcomes are assigned different values, the player exerts effort in order to influence the outcome, the player feels attached to the outcome, and the Consequences of the activity are optional and negotiable " (2005, 36).

Once we have defined the object of study, we can then analyse how the audiences have changed over the years. While the magic bullet theory believed in a total passivity in the reception, that, as a "hypodermic needle", can impose to the consumers contents of the medium, the most modern theories, on the contrary, consider the audience in the perspective of the cultural studies, which think that audiences are substantially active. Abercrombie and Longhurst (1998) agree with this last point of view, and they have theorized the diffused audience, a term that wants to explain a historical evolution, where at the end of that progression, the audiences are dispersed in society. In this context, any activity becomes a performance due to the omnipresence and the importance that the media have gained in our society.

However, this is an optimistic scenario and other academics have opposed the concept of extended audience. This focuses on how the media power is extended, in fact, to society, but that this does not become totally diffused in it. The construction of media products by the audience is not completely released from corporations. Besides, in a world where the media messages are everywhere, the differences between audience members and performers increase rather than decline (Couldry 2005).

Once we have understood the environment in which the mods laid, we are now able to start to define the prosumer and *UGC*, key concepts to comprehend the world of conversions.

Prosumer is a word formed from the combination of two words: producer and consumer. M. McLuhan (1970) was the first to hypothesize that producers and consumers were going to mix together as a result of new technologies. However, the concept had for the first time a name only with A. Toffler (1980). He thought that in a saturated market the only way to increase profits would be a highly customized production. This would be possible only involving consumers in the design phase of the goods: the so-called massification of production. This is prosumer according to him. With the web, prosumer has radically changed its meaning, and instead of a business

relationship, it has become a phenomenon that results from a direct action of the consumer, in shapes that sometimes are unpleasant for businesses. To emphasize this change and its greater equity, A. Bruns (2006) forged another neologism, *produsage*, from the combination of the terms production and usage:

The concept of *produsage* highlights that within the communities which engage in the collaborative creation and extension of information and knowledge that we examine on this site, the role of consumer and even that of end user have long disappeared, and the distinctions between producers and users of content have faded into comparative insignificance users are always already necessarily also producers of the shared knowledge base, regardless of whether they are aware of this role - they have become a new, hybrid, producer (ibid.).

The *UGC* is one of the media products of the producers. We can take their definition of the OECD (2007). The document, entitled *Participative Web: User-Created Content*, delineates three central features:

- **Publication requirement:** while theoretically UCC could be made by a user and never actually be published online or elsewhere, we focus here on the work that is published in some context, be it on a publicly accessible website or on a page of a social networking site only accessible to a select group of people
- **Creative effort:** this implies that a certain amount of creative effort was put into creating the work or adapting existing works to construct a new one; i.e. users must add their own value to the work. The creative effort behind UCC often also has a collaborative element to it, as is the case with websites which users can edit collaboratively
- **Creation outside of professional routines and practises:** user-created content is generally created outside of professional routines and practices. It often does not have an institutional or a commercial market context (2007, 8).

Companies that wish to boost the production of UGC and to use their economic potential should take care of the drivers that are elements which encourage the production of this user-created content. They are cited in the mentioned *Participative Web: User-Created Content*: technological drivers, social drivers, economic drivers and

institutional and legal drivers (2007, 14).

In particular, for H. Jenkins (2006b), it is wrong to assume that the most important ones are the new interactive technologies, but this is the social aspect and, in particular, the relationships that take place between the consumers. On the other hand, the technological side is certainly not to be ignored, since the creation of editors² and the release of kits³ by the developer, in recent years has generated a large number of mods. In conclusion, the modding, both its activity and its contents, has got all the analysed categories. A mod is a *User Generated Content (UGC)*, and as such, we will give it all the UGC features. In addition, a mod is a typical produsage product, as it has the general principles stated by Bruns. However, we must not lose the theoretical framework of the extended audience. It is also true that this new creative vitality of Internet users has helped to set a process of democratization of the medium, whereas the power of corporations has not disappeared and will not disappear.

Chapter 2 - Testimonials: How Video games have changed

In chapter 2 there are three interviews, collected in September and October 2012 via Facebook. The interviews are all "experts" deeply immersed in the gaming environment. Through this, I want to integrate the primary data of Chapter 1. We do not think that this method of research is exhaustive, but the aim is to collect different life experiences in different historical periods of the video game medium.

As a result of the interviews, we can see three changes: 1) consumer environment moved firstly to bars from game rooms, and finally, in the homes with the home-console (which, however, has not extinguished the research for a "face to face" contact, realized with the phenomenon of lan-party); 2) media grammar has evolved, allowing games to mention, be mentioned or be transposed into works of other arts, as films and books (on this change depends the maturity of the medium that is still not a complete process, as there are some cultural resistances to give an artistic dignity to video

² An editor is a program or an internal mode of a video game that allows for editing.

³ The conversion kits, also called development kit or dev-kit, programs are distributed free online by the producers of a game to allow everyone to edit it. The difference with the editor is that it is internal to a game, while kits are always external programs.

games); 3) There has been an evolution from active to passive consumers, which, according to H. Jenkins (2006a), has been possible thanks to the participation that has been created within the new interactive technological environment of the Internet, and that will lead popular culture to prevail over the culture transmitted by the corporation (actually although there has been a change, this idea is too optimistic and almost prophetic, as the power of the media companies will never be totally outclassed).

Chapter 3 - History and state of modding in the games industry

In chapter 3 we shift our point of view to the market of the games industry. Firstly, we start pondering if video games are categorized into the so-called "creative industries"⁴ category. There is no doubt that video games transmit an immense cultural value and that we can find in them all of the properties⁵ listed by E. Caves (2000, 2-10). Like music, literature and poetry, the video games industry can take advantage of the individual and collective creativity to create new products and to discover fresh talents, as it can take advantage of a huge group of users in constant confrontation and competition. The video game industry is undoubtedly a creative industry and the mods appear as an essential ingredient in the recipe of innovation that can be used by companies, having the potential to become the lifeblood of the sector's development. Analysing the UGC and their relationship with the gaming industry, it is important to compose a map of the evolution of modding, in order to understand the reasons for its success and the range of its economic importance. This map starts from the first mod, *Smurfenstein Castle* (1983), total conversion of *Castle Wolfenstein* (1981), passing through all those video games that have left a mark on the history of modifications, such as *Doom* (1993), *Half-Life* (1998), *Unreal* (1998), *Grand Theft Auto* (series), *Littlebigplanet* (series) and *Defense of the Ancients* (2003), called *DotA*, and others. On the other hand, there are also negative examples such as *Call of Duty* (series) and

⁴ The creative industries are "those industries which have their origin in individual creativity, skill and talent and which have a potential for wealth and job creation through the generation and exploitation of intellectual property"(European Commission 2010).

⁵ Nobody knows principle, art for art's sake, motley crew principle, infinite variety, A list/B list, time flies, ars longa (2000, ?).

Battlefield (series). In these two FPS⁶, what bothers the fans is that these businesses have not distributed the conversion kits. The motivation behind such behaviour is that, as is the opinion of the fan communities, a rise in the life cycle of their products through the mods, contrasts with their “annualization”⁷. Furthermore, the creation of free additional content for games would compete with the DLC⁸.

Thanks to these examples, we can understand how the industry is moving through the market distortions caused by the Internet. These have led to the multiplication of resources for modders, to the formation of large communities and to the supply of services and programs, produced by the developers, for the creation and distribution of the modifications.

Among these historical examples, we cannot but notice the attitude of id Software, the developer of *Wolfenstein 3D* (1992) and *Doom* (1993), which discovered by chance the potential of the Internet communities. That happened because *Wolfenstein 3D* was released with a particular type of license. It was able to be downloaded completely for free as a shareware⁹. That particular software licence is the main reason for the success of the title. With the free availability of the code, users quickly created online communities of fans, which, combined with the passion for the new type of game just invented, the FPS, wanted to reinterpret it in their own way. The team soon realized the potential of the phenomenon, and decided to put it into practise in *Doom* with special tools released by developers: the development kits. This was the key for the success of the game and from this moment the phenomenon of mods began to rocket. *Doom* entered permanently in the users’ knowledge, creating cultural protocols that lasted against the further technical innovations.

However, there are also companies which, as we have mentioned, do not follow and do not believe in the utility of these grassroots expressions. The games industry, therefore, contains corporations that we can place along a continuum from an attitude of

⁶ FPS: acronym of first person shooter.

⁷ The trend of the video game companies to release a new title of a series on an annual basis.

⁸ Downloadable content (DLC) is an additional content distributed through the Internet by the game official publisher, in most cases with fee.

⁹ Shareware ... is proprietary software that is provided to users without payment on a trial basis and is often limited by any combination of functionality, availability (it may be functional for a limited time period only), or convenience (the software may present a dialog ... reminding the user to purchase it ...). Shareware is often offered as a download from an Internet website or as a compact disc included with a periodical ... The rationale behind shareware is to give buyers the opportunity to use the program and judge its usefulness before purchasing a license for the full version of the software (Gaudeul 2008).

"prohibitionist" to a "collaboration" one (Jenkins 2006a, 134-135). A prohibitionist company will start lawsuit with everyone who has distributed copyright material, without making any distinction between those who modified the content by creating communities, and those who practiced piracy. The collaborative companies will be enthusiast of the grassroots production in their circles of fans. That will promote the creation of amateur material, also giving editor, source code and other kits to the users, which can create a positive brand image.

These described business models are opposite, but one is not necessarily better than the other one. There are also other variables, such as the competitive environment and stakeholders. While prohibitionist behaviour can be very profitable in a monopoly or an oligopoly, when new players enter the market and this becomes overstocked, trying to listen to and satisfy the customers becomes a crucial point. This is also a way to move the capital to a safer investment, once you hear what players want, without mentioning the saving in the cost of the ideation, that would be outsourced. We can find out which of the two paradigms is the best only through serious researches that take into consideration data and statistics both of the short and the long term concerning the industry. I will leave an open window to this type of study in a forthcoming work. Despite this, thanks to the example given by id Software and by the other companies that we have analysed, we can conclude that there have been a high number of advantages for businesses. Mods have taught us that if the community around a game take part to the development, the implementation and the renewal or just the direct run of video games will progress faster and with more chance to succeed. *DotA* is the example that confirms that.

The cases show that if these fans are included in future projects, the results of the games will only get better. I can even theorize that all games, once they have reached a certain number of fans, can be then given to their communities, along a continuum that includes a maximum participation (*DotA*), to its absence, an example of which is *Battlefield 3* (2011), despite its success is in part due to the mods on its previous titles.

In conclusion, in the examined cases there were undeniable economic advantages for the companies that allow and stimulate the creation of mods, and listen to and work according to the tips of the fan community, such as an exponential increase of life and positive positioning of the brand compared to the competitors.