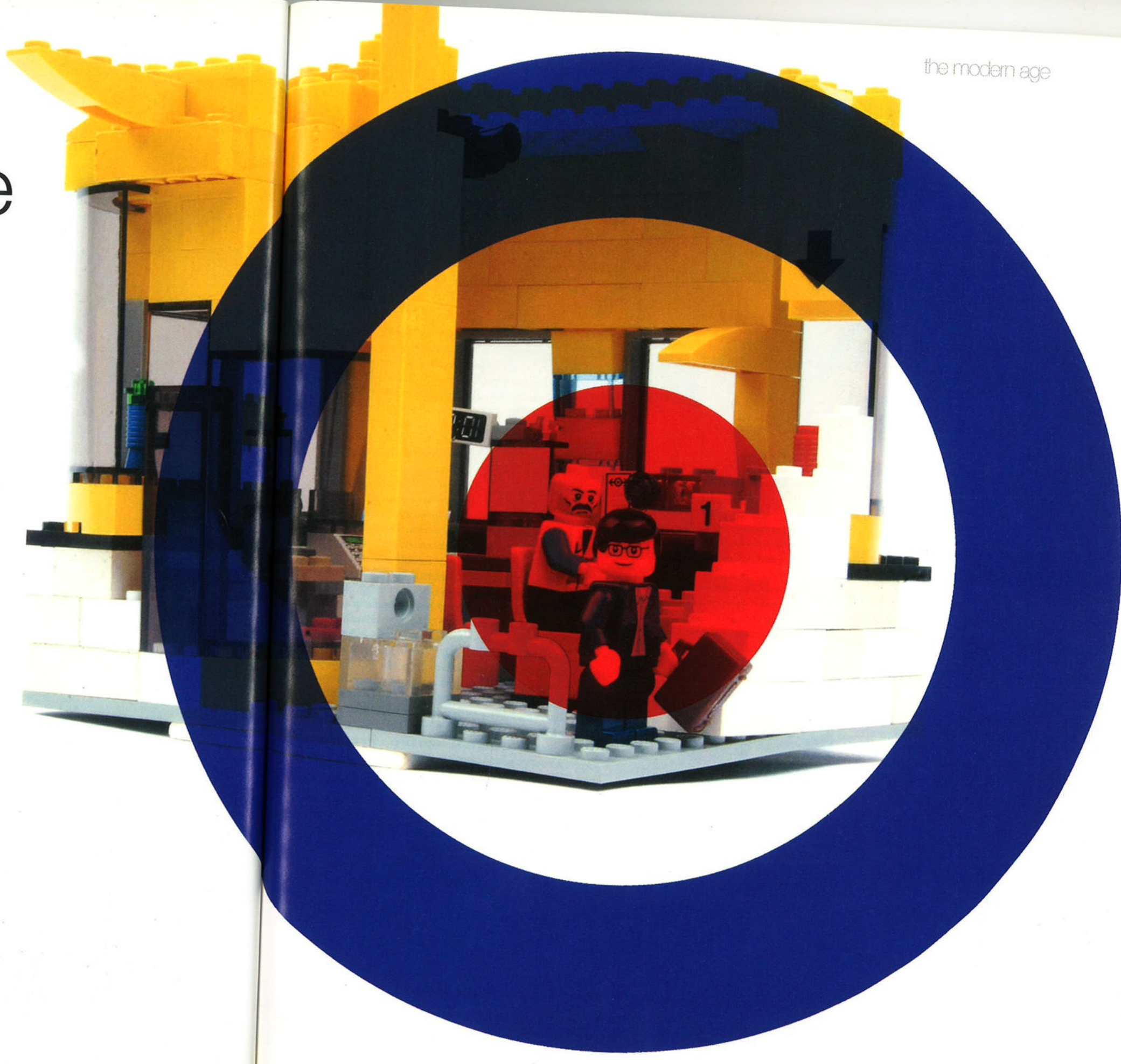


The Modern Age

Mods have graduated from Internet servers to being an integrated part of publishers' marketing strategies and shop shelves worldwide. But where do they go next?

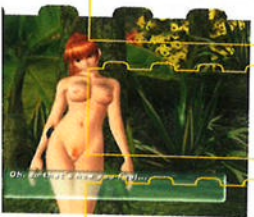
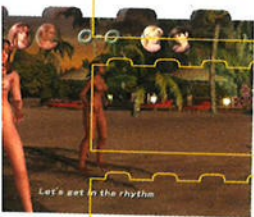
The Modern Age. In terms of the PC, the title rings true, even if you ignore the pun. The revolution and popularisation of mods that started with *Wolfenstein 3D* and *Doom* reached what could be considered maturity in the years following the release of the first *Half-Life*, that game's lifespan expanded to meet its five-years-later sequel by a string of superlative user-created experiences. Disappointment-tinged reviews of *Quake III*, while often nonplussed with the actual content of the game proper, insisted it was worth buying for the support it would inevitably receive from the mod community. *Neverwinter Nights* went one further, with the campaign more of a demonstration of what you could do with the highly developed toolset rather than the central reason for purchasing. Retail releases of game mods sit side by side with 'real' releases on the shop shelves and the teams that created them are being employed en masse.

It's even starting to affect game magazines' strategies. "Having a large mod to covermount is definitely comparable – in terms of one mag's commercial advantage over its competitors – to a new playable demo," notes 'PC Gamer's senior editor **Matthew Pierce**. "Of course it ultimately depends on the quality of the mod (and demo you're comparing it to), but the first chance to play an expansion of an existing title is a very compelling reason to pick up any mag."





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EDGE #126

Mod culture is now an accepted part of the industry, and a game failing to release its development tools is more worthy of comment in a review than a game that does. User-created content has won its war for acceptance. Since seemingly everyone, on the PC at least, has accepted its wisdom, the question now is what happens next. Mods won their war. Can they keep their peace?

Spreading the pool

One of the first changes in the current situation are the after effects of everyone releasing their tools – namely there being a surfeit of riches for interested parties to use. Is this going to spread the pool of talented modders too thin? "The numbers would suggest so," argues Lee Bamber of Dark Basic. "If ten tools were shared between 500 end users, you would have 50 users per tool and the start of a viable community that could share ideas and build on the knowledge of others. The community would reveal and nurture this talent for game design. Now consider 100 tools shared between 500 end users and you have only five people using that tool. Not much community help, no feedback and no opportunity to show off your talents."

Mods rarely exist out of context of a community offering feedback and encouragement, as well as sharing knowledge of what works and what doesn't in the temperamental software, and if the proliferating number of communities



The freedom of the modding world means that all games, from the realism of *Day of Defeat* or *Battlefield 1942* to the Day-glo *Buzzybots*, are possible

reduces each of their sizes, the results could be catastrophic. Not everyone holds such a negative view. Charlie Cleveland, programmer and designer on recent *Half-Life*-powered mod hit *Natural Selection*, argues the contrary position. "I say the more the better," he states. "Serious mod development is moving increasingly outside the FPS genre, and many games have to release their tools for this to happen. Even competition within the same genre is good, as it means the tools and company incentives – such as mod expos and mod contests with cash prizes – will continue to improve. As more games and game genres support it, more modders appear, and more mods are created."

While clearly only a limited number of gamers will ever want to dabble in the creative process, it's a fair assumption that not all the possible candidates are already doing it.

So, what does happen when gamers make games? Are these people actively courted by developers and publishers, and is this tiny community likely to grow? "Although the number of games featuring mod tools is increasing, I think a significant amount of talent will stay concentrated around a few core games," notes GMax tool specialist Chris Cookson. "Trying to nail down the criteria for these particular 'core' games is difficult, but a combination of commercial success, cutting edge technology and capable editing tools is likely to feature highly."

It should also be noted that while the commercial rewards for a developer whose game's mod community produces the next *Counter-Strike* are considerable, releasing a software development kit for a game isn't without its expenditure. When asked about whether Ion Storm would be releasing the tools for its forthcoming *Deus Ex II*, project lead Harvey Smith answered: "We're still thinking about that. That was popular with the first game – but it was popular with 500 people. It took a ton of money and time, and a lot of time." The dev budget and human manpower thrown at releasing the tools for a community that doesn't flower is essentially wasted. And even if a minor community does blossom,

without a *Counter-Strike* it doesn't exactly sell games. And which communities are the ones that flower? "I think it has more to do with how many people buy and play your game. If you're a mass, mass hit, then something like that can add," notes Smith. *Deus Ex* is one of the top-50-selling PC games ever in the UK. If it isn't big enough to develop a community, then what hope does anything smaller have? While other games may release their mod tools, if only the top few produce mods that gather greater public attention, increasingly we may see teams deciding to reallocate their budgets into more definitively rewarding areas.

Others have used short cuts. Many toolsets are simply the same developer tools repackaged with little thought given to the end user. For the uninitiated modder it's a significant barrier, particularly as documentation is often scant. Mod

snobs might argue that this is the very thing that drives the community, encouraging sharing and oneupmanship. Take Looking Glass's *Thief*, which released its notoriously unfriendly editor with a minimum of instructive materials and resulted in user-created content as good as that of the original game's, if not better.

Putting aside the admirable fanaticism of the *Thief* community, why did *Deus Ex* produce so little and the lesser-selling *Thief* create such riches? Perhaps the difference is in the core nature of the game. Making a *Deus Ex* level requires huge efforts across several skillsets – narrative, level construction, NPC work and so on. "Creating a singleplayer *Deus Ex* mod presents several unique challenges," agrees Steve Tack of the *Deus Ex* mod *Zodiac*. "You need to create a surprising amount of character dialogue and other text elements that work together to tie a story together in a coherent manner and flows from one mission to the next." In comparison, with *Thief* if you create a room, a lightsource, and some guards you create a mini-level which you can play



EDGE #126

in a way that compares, if only vaguely, with the mother game. The same obviously holds true with more shooting-orientated games. But for poor, maximalist *Deus Ex*, the box-room with a guard bears no relation to the game proper. It's fair to say the more effort it takes to create any kind of reward from the toolset, the less chance of reaching the critical mass required to create something of critical worth.

Gathering an audience

While it's the big multiplayer mods that attract the attention, an interesting trend is that they're also the mods that most often fail to gather an audience. "It's easier to create a successful singleplayer mod as opposed to a multiplayer mod," argues Neil Manke of Black Widow Games and designer on successful *Half-Life* mod *They Hunger*. "The main ingredients for a successful singleplayer mod are a high-quality storyline, impressive visuals, well-planned gameflow, original challenges, and other elements that can be implemented with the right talents and proper effort."

Multiplayer mods are relatively unpredictable. "It seems to me extremely difficult to judge how exactly a multiplayer game should be designed so that it will strike the right chords and appeal to a lot of people," Manke continues. "Even professional game development companies rarely succeed in creating a multiplayer game that even slightly approaches [*Counter-Strike's*] popularity."

Even if a singleplayer game is popular, it doesn't mean that it's as likely to reach the stage of commercial exploitation. "It's highly unlikely that players who have played the free version will have any interest in buying it later," argues Manke.

"The original *Deus Ex* levels has about 400 visible polygons at any time; in the sequel, 40,000 will be shown. This is a huge increase in workload and possibly marks the end of the lone-wolf modder"

"That's the reason why *Gunman* had to be released as a commercial product only. In the future, we will probably see the best singleplayer mods having to choose either free or commercial distribution."

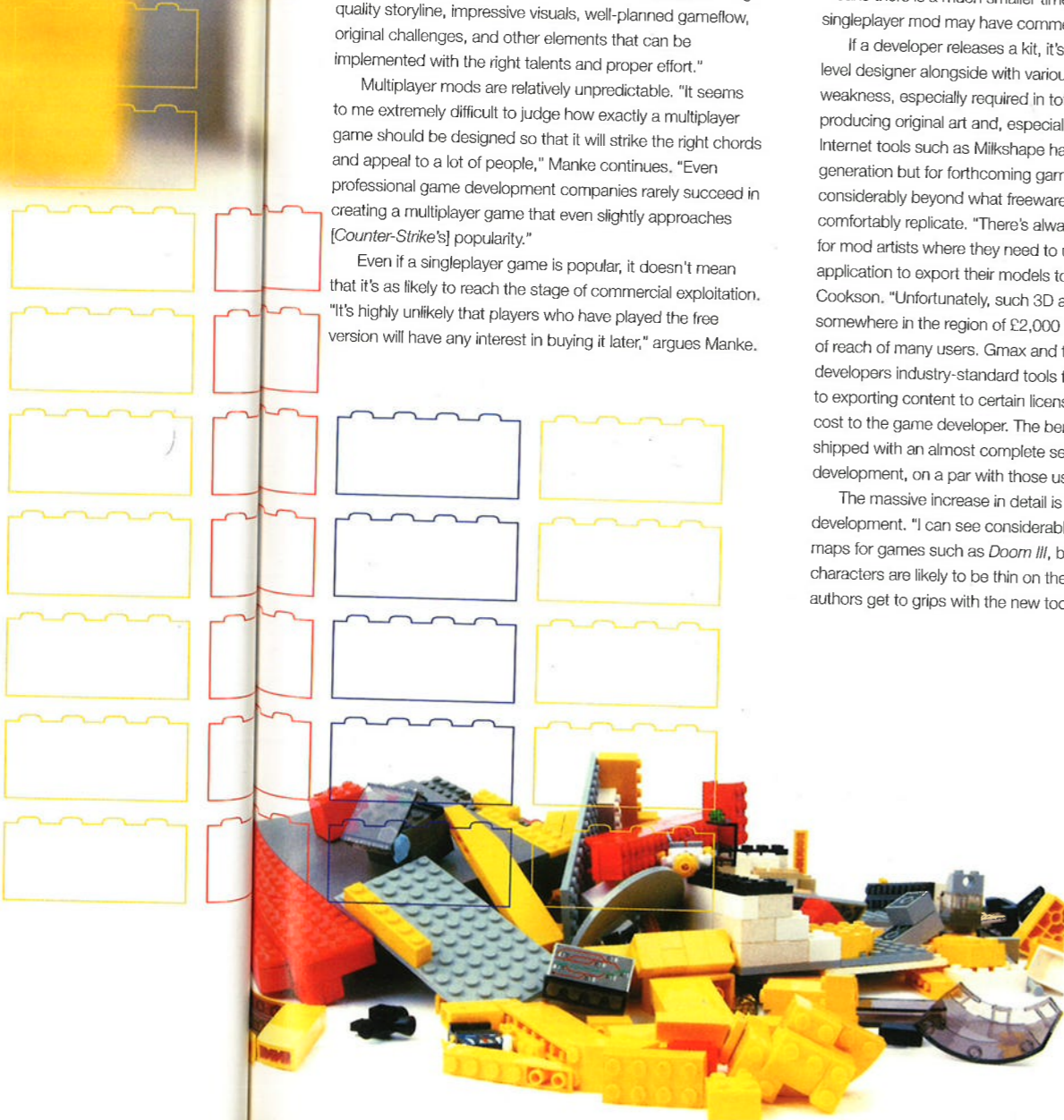
"Also of note is the fact that multiplayer mods can and are frequently updated and improved, whereas singleplayer mods have to be the finished product at time of release," agrees fellow Black Widow designer/coder Einar Saukas. "This means there is a much smaller time window where a singleplayer mod may have commercial viability."

If a developer releases a kit, it's almost certainly purely the level designer alongside with various importing tools. One weakness, especially required in total conversions, is in producing original art and, especially, in-game models. Free Internet tools such as Milkshape have been fine for the last generation but for forthcoming games the detail required is considerably beyond what freeware applications can comfortably replicate. "There's always been this gaping hole for mod artists where they need to use a particular graphics application to export their models to the game engine," notes Cookson. "Unfortunately, such 3D apps tend to cost somewhere in the region of £2,000 upwards putting them out of reach of many users. Gmax and tools like it finally give mod developers industry-standard tools for free, although limited to exporting content to certain licensed games only, and at a cost to the game developer. The benefit is that games can be shipped with an almost complete set of tools for mod development, on a par with those used by the professionals."

The massive increase in detail is going to cause a lag in development. "I can see considerable interest in user-created maps for games such as *Doom III*, but user-created characters are likely to be thin on the ground while mod authors get to grips with the new tools," continues Cookson,

"Authoring bump maps by hand is not particularly easy without good preview tools, and creating them using high-polygon models requires a very different skillset to the low-polygon work most mod artists are currently used to. It will be interesting to see how long it takes for the first *Doom III/Deus Ex II* custom characters to appear on Polycount.com in comparison to new maps. My money's on the maps simply due to the fact the full editing toolsets will be available for creating them."

While the tools may exist, this doesn't mean that they're possible to handle for smaller teams. To take a random example, the original *Deus Ex* levels had around 400 visible polygons at any time. In the sequel, 40,000 will be shown on screen. This is a huge increase in the workload of any individual, and possibly marks the end of the lone-wolf modder. Erik Johnson, project manager at Valve, thinks





ALIENS

For *Doom*, this challenging total conversion was an early and highly successful proponent of the other-media-based mod, with the entirety of the game's structure altered to star the Geiger-designed aliens. Also highly notable for its stealth-based play years ahead of the rest of the industry.



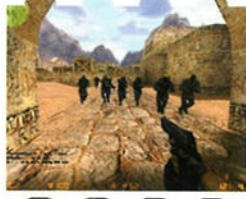
CAPTURE-THE-FLAG

Quake caught the multiplayer masses, but it took the *Capture the Flag* mod to help push the popularity. An application of this mod seems almost standard edition for anyone releasing a modern multiplayer game. Unfortunately, most miss the games' notorious grappling hooks.



TEAM FORTRESS

Initially appearing on *Quake*, this introduced the option for players to select character classes on each side, with hugely varying powers. While team members had previously been hired, the purchasing of a mod wholesale, as Valve did here, was a sign of things to come.



COUNTER-STRIKE

Counter-Strike's success was unprecedented, but based on the application of its core rules. A simple concept – terrorists versus counter-terrorists – and a structure that rewarded patience, cunning and – occasionally – camping beyond the call of duty. At its height, was being played by more than the rest of the shooting games online combined. Also purchased by Valve.



GUNMAN CHRONICLES

Not actually a mod; it just started as one. This future cowboy-themed game started off being designed as a singleplayer mod, but was picked up and given a development budget to take to release. While hardly the greatest firstperson game of the period, an important development.



THIEVERY

By far the least popular mod at the list, *Thievery's* of note as an example of a community turning mod tools to their own device. There's no multiplayer for Looking Glass classic *Thief*? So, using *Unreal Tournament*, let's craft our own. Innovative in all sorts of ways, and worthy of a much wider audience.



NATURAL SELECTION

Once again, it's a tight riff of 'Aliens' mythos, in an action-strategy context. Aliens evolve up their pathways. Humans construct weapons. Acclaimed on release for *Half-Life* in 2002 and downloaded over a million times, this is testament to how a mod can extend a game's longevity.



DESERT COMBAT

As *Gulf War II* kicked off, the *Battlefield 1942* community set about busily recreating it with this freshly released alpha-version mod. It takes certain liberties with the war – namely that the Iraqi side has comparable equipment and can fight back. Reportedly currently in discussion with a publisher about a proper release, too.

MOD CRIB NOTES



change is inevitable: "We're beginning to sound like a broken record at this point, but it's still true: mod teams are going to start looking a lot more like professional game studios."

"The scenario is similar to the evolution of studios from the lone game programmer," **Lee Bamber** agrees, noting its parallel nature to the rest of an industry. "The amount of content you need these days for a single level means you need an army of people to help out. The lone-wolf mod developers can still find a place for themselves; however they are at a significant disadvantage when pitched against a team doing the same thing, much like the games industry itself."

Perhaps, however, this is passing stage. With the increasing graphical density, developers will start to work out more efficient ways of generating content rather than the manual and painstaking brick-by-brick approach. "It seems like Crytek's *Far Cry* level editor is a good example of this – a whole island populated with beaches, rivers, foliage and suchlike can be created from scratch in a few seconds," notes Cookson. "Trying to reproduce an equivalent island in UnrealEd would be a much more arduous task."

Shifting from visual flair to content

Some companies are moving the emphasis of creation away from mere visual flair and on to content. The sharpest proponent of this approach is BioWare, with its *Neverwinter Nights*. "I do think developers will need to make the decision very early on if they wish to include a toolset in a game, as it should be given a tremendous amount of development time for the expressed purpose of making it easier for the end user," notes **Jay Watamaniuk**, BioWare's community manager. "The point of a toolset is to draw in more people, not to scare them off with immense complexity. The modders



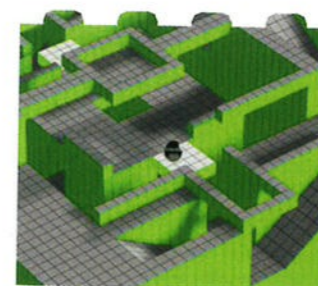
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Mods have clearly paid off for BioWare, with over 2,500 extra modules available to download from its vault, an immediate added bonus to any purchasers of the game. How Valve has profited from its mod community is undeniable – but still extraordinary. Even now, a few scant months before the release of the sequel proper, the retail version of *Half-Life* mod 'Day of Defeat' is debuting on sale. However, while this is clearly good for these individual game publishers and the

team, through extra sales, and the gamers themselves, through extending their play experience, is this extreme longevity actually good for the industry as a whole? If someone's playing just one game for such an extended period, this is clearly drawing away from the time they could be spending on playing – and, more relevantly for the industry, purchasing – new games.

Unsurprisingly, Valve and BioWare don't consider it a problem. "Making our games more accessible for mod makers is something that our customers clearly appreciate in the end," responds Johnson. "There aren't any other factors that play into our decision-making process."

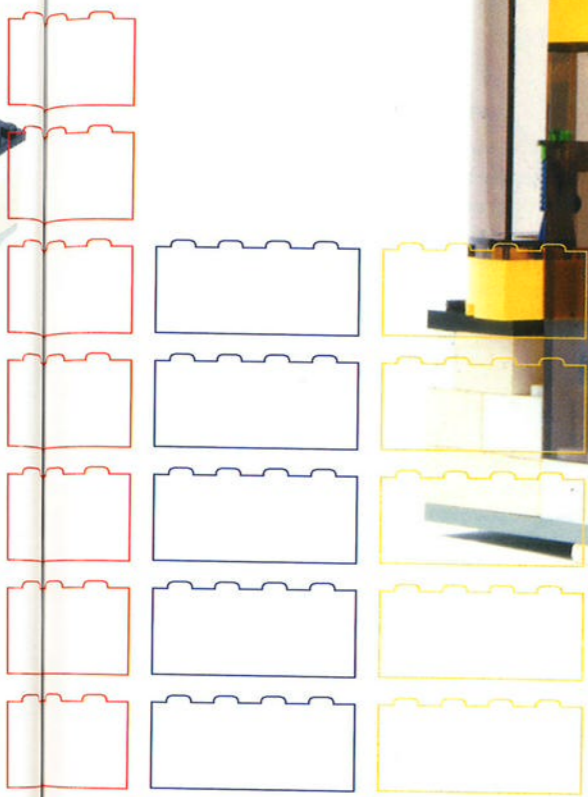


Marble Madness 2003 takes arcade pleasures as its inspiration and prays lawyers don't notice. *Scientist Hunt* takes chainsaws as its cue, and hopes that 'The Daily Mail' does



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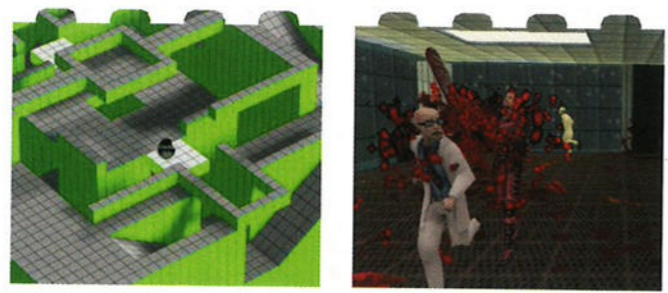
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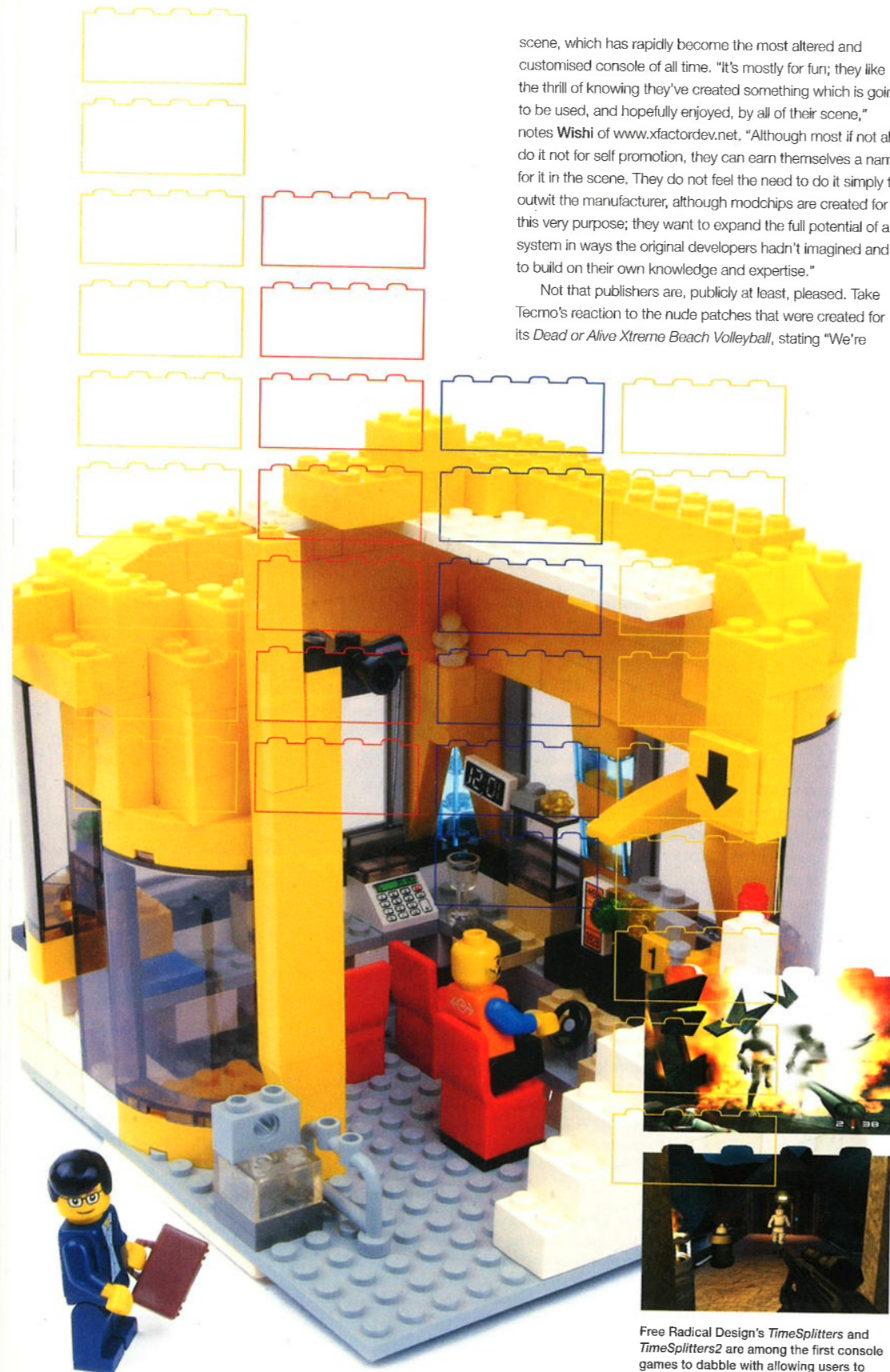
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"Mods are good business," says Watamaniuk. "As a developer we need to sell games to pay people's salaries so anything that will promote a game to increase sales is a good thing." And, of course, there's always the tempting pot of gold at the end of the rainbow. "There is always the chance that some community mod team will come up with a way to play a game that was never intended but ramps up interest in a whole new way," continues Watamaniuk playfully. "I think everyone has heard of *Counter-Strike*, eh?" With such possible great rewards coming from a successful mod scene around a game, any influence of the wider picture is clearly going to be minimal.

The console mod scene
 But it's not all PCs. The other great unknown in the future of mod development is the sacrosanct bodies of consoles, where user-created content is beginning to make its first fledgling appearances. The level editor included in *TimeSplitters* and extended in its sequel brought level editing into the living room for the first time, in this generation at least. However, it's hard to believe that anything larger than tokenism will ever appear through this method – for those attracted to the full freedom of mods, the opportunities of the PC are genuinely overwhelming. Especially, as now, you can bring this autonomy back to consoles. This has particularly flourished on the Xbox modding

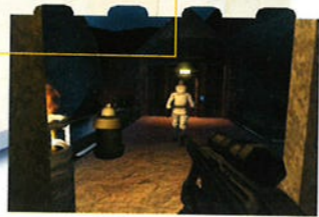


Marble Madness 2003 takes arcade pleasures as its inspiration and prays lawyers don't notice. *Scientist Hunt* takes chainsaws as its cue, and hopes that "The Daily Mail" does



scene, which has rapidly become the most altered and customised console of all time. "It's mostly for fun; they like the thrill of knowing they've created something which is going to be used, and hopefully enjoyed, by all of their scene," notes **Wishi** of www.xfactordev.net. "Although most if not all do it not for self promotion, they can earn themselves a name for it in the scene. They do not feel the need to do it simply to outwit the manufacturer, although modchips are created for this very purpose; they want to expand the full potential of a system in ways the original developers hadn't imagined and to build on their own knowledge and expertise."

Not that publishers are, publicly at least, pleased. Take Tecmo's reaction to the nude patches that were created for its *Dead or Alive Xtreme Beach Volleyball*, stating "We're



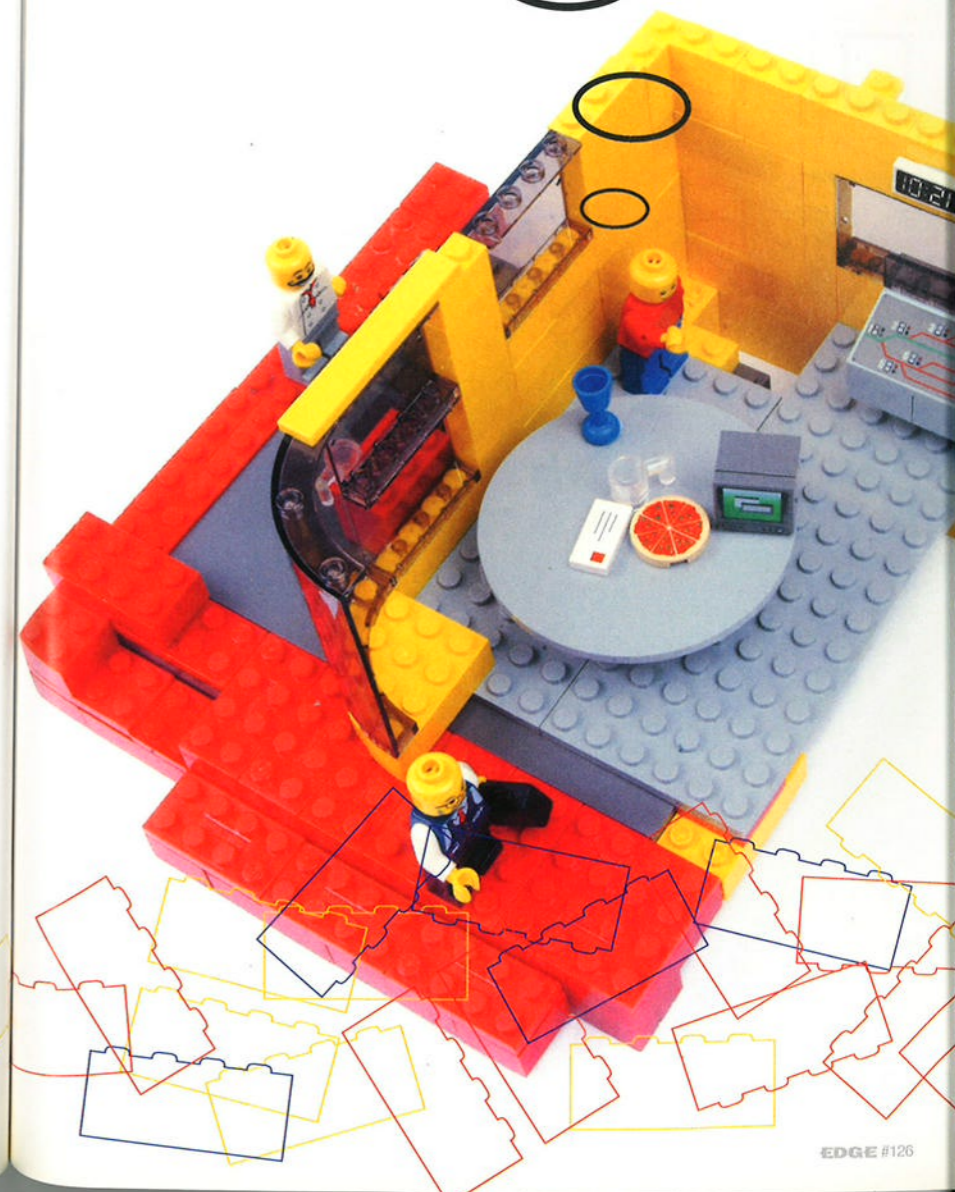
Free Radical Design's *TimeSplitters* and *TimeSplitters2* are among the first console games to dabble with allowing users to create content in order to extend the playing experience. But what comes next?

watching you very closely! Please do not post things that infringe copyrights and other legal issues" on its Website. "I'm sure the developers are just as interested to see what people do with their game as the users are, although obviously this wouldn't be the view we get from their PR companies," notes **Wishi** sardonically. "Obviously, the big money earners in the company want to prevent changes to their game, especially if they give extra features to the users for free. In the case of *Dead or Alive Xtreme Beach Volleyball*, I'm sure the main reason that Tecmo wants it to stop is so that it does not become associated with dirtying its company image."

Modding of this sort, being unsanctioned, can only really operate in direct proportion to how much a company chooses to guard its hardware. "I think we may see some changes in the system architecture in order to increase security, especially in the next generation of Xboxes," notes **Wishi**. While primarily to stop piracy, this will also strongly and negatively impact the console modding community.

While in the current generation of consoles, it's fair to expect more stories similar to the modder's pointed critique of Tecmo's marketing hypocrisy, if you're generous, or a coder's barely suppressed desire to add nipples to everything in the world completely if you're not, it's also true to say that the possibilities for this sort of action will decline. The potential for modding on consoles is only ever relative to the security a company chooses to impose. In the next generation, with a different stringency of security systems, expect the amount of activity to wane. A shame, but hardly surprising.

Which leaves the future of user-created content, in a form greater than a limited feature in a single game, very much in the hands of PCs. And despite the challenges modding has to face, with the degree of acceptance it's engendered, it still possesses the possibility of becoming the equivalent of an art scene or small-film group. There's still some way to go. "I think it will continue to increase as publishers, press and the gaming public grow out of the bias that creating mods is in some way intrinsically less valuable than creating games," speculates **Cleveland**. "It's like saying that an *Unreal*-engine-based game isn't a full game. I view this very much like the change that TV has made recently. I used to think that if something was on TV, it couldn't be as artistically meaningful as a movie, merely because of the medium. Now that we've seen quality productions like 'The Sopranos', 'Six Feet Under', and 'Queer as Folk', it's painfully obvious that TV can indeed compete with movies, and due to their longer episodic format, can exceed them in some ways." Mods, essentially, are about giving the world freedom to do whatever they want with a developer's precious game. In a very real way, mod's future is whatever mod makers choose to make it.



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A brief history of mods

The problem that faces anyone who attempts to write a history on something as intrinsically chaotic as mods is exactly where to start it. To do so requires creating a working definition of what a mod actually is. If you choose to start at the point where mods are made possible by the release of the design tools, you immediately remove the possibility of discussing unsanctioned modifications. But if you include unsanctioned modifications you immediately push the start point to a nameless fiddler altering a line in a commercially released piece of software for the simple of pleasure of seeing what it does. Remember those lines of BASIC you entered to have extra lives on the Spectrum? That's a mod by any reasonable definition of the term.

Perhaps that's the point – modding is very much based in the urge to deconstruct and alter an existent system for the joy of it, and has almost certainly existed as long as there's been videogames. In a recognisable form, you can at least go back to 1982 and the original *Castle Wolfenstein* of the Apple II. A popular total conversion was constructed, which swapped all the in-game characters and text for assets which related to a popular children's television show of the period. *Castle Smurferstein* proved a typical irreverent start to the phenomenon known as modding.

Mods as known to the modern gamer blossomed along with the two early-'90s technologies that popularised the PC shareware scene, namely PCs which at last could create three-dimensional worlds, and wider access to the Internet. The first allowed the PC game to at last be accessible to an audience uninterested in all things two-dimensional and icon-based and the latter provided it with a conduit to be accessible through. First *Wolfenstein* and then *Doom* flickered around misappropriated work and university PCs – and shortly after, mods for them.

Id encouraged this action, simply asking that any of this extra user-created content require a full version of *Doom* to be used, rather than the freely distributed shareware version. Perhaps surprisingly, most modders seemed to stick to this restriction, and it showed the start of the mutually beneficial relationship between mod culture and mod-savvy developers. *Final Doom*, for example, released in 1996, was a compilation of some of the best of the user-created content, with a cut of the profits being given to the creators. The trend of repackaging mod content for a mass audience started at this point, and continues to this day in the form of mods-turned-games like *Counter-Strike* and *Day of Defeat*.

Quake's release opened up the third dimension for mod culture, but at a cost. Initially the level-design tools weren't released, and proved cumbersome when they actually did appear. Enter an array of user-created level-editing tools, of which *Worldcraft* proved the most popular. From this came the first array of *Quake* multiplayer mods, including early successes like *Capture the Flag* and *Team Fortress*.

From there it's just a short step to *Counter-Strike* and the modern age.