

# Symposium

## Intrinsic motivation: *fIOW*, video games, and participatory culture

Braxton Soderman

*Brown University, Providence, Rhode Island, United States*

[0.1] *Abstract*—Through a comparison of the free online Flash game updated for PlayStation 3 to *World of Warcraft*, I investigate participatory culture in the game community. The question of why people pursue activities that offer no monetary or similar reward is answered in part by analyzing fan-produced game modifications or mods.

[0.2] *Keywords*—Csikszentmihalyi; Fan game; Mod

Soderman, Braxton. 2009. Intrinsic motivation: *fIOW*, video games, and participatory culture. *Transformative Works and Cultures*, no. 2. <http://dx.doi.org/10.3983/twc.2009.0097>.

---

### 1. Introduction

[1.1] Recently, the majority of my gaming has centered on two games: *fIOW* by thatgamecompany (2007; <http://thatgamecompany.com/>) and *World of Warcraft* (WoW) by Blizzard Entertainment (2004; <http://www.blizzard.com/us/>). The time I spend on these two games can hardly be said to be equal, with WoW dominating most of my time while I turn to *fIOW* for short, periodic interludes of "casual" play between the endless work of increasing the skills and experience of my character (that is, *leveling*) in WoW and the endless work of thinking about games while trying to capture some of these thoughts within the bright white space of the electronic page. I suppose you might say that at this point in my life I find my time split between leveling a 40-something priest in WoW and leveling—at a much slower pace—a career as an (early 30s) academic scribbling away at a dissertation on games. Somewhere in between these two modes of work is *fIOW*.

[1.2] Originally released as a free online Flash game (<http://intihuatani.usc.edu/cloud/flowing/>), *fIOW* is now updated and available for the PlayStation 3 as a low-priced download over Sony's gaming network. In *fIOW*, you play an elegant, abstract creature swimming around in a sea of other organisms, consuming them at your own leisure and thus transforming yourself into a larger, more elaborate entity composed of connected circles and polygons, intricate

assemblages of lines and shapes (figure 1). As you descend into the depths of the game, you encounter other creatures, often more challenging to defeat and consume. Yet the game is explicitly designed to allow all types of players to find their own groove, their own "flow zone"; if the competition with other creatures is overwhelming at the lower depths, you can easily return to a more manageable level that matches your current skill. In theory, your choices during game play allow you to subtly adjust the challenges to your skill level so as better to keep the flow going.



**Figure 1.** Screenshot of my creature from *fLOW*, PlayStation 3 version (*thatgamecompany*, 2007).

[1.3] The game *WoW* is also designed a bit like *fLOW*, offering game choices that allow you to adjust your current skill level to the challenges encountered. For example, the quests that you choose to complete are color-coded according to the level of difficulty that you will likely encounter; in another example, players can seek out opportunities for player-versus-player encounters (often a more challenging aspect of the game), or they can stick to competing against computer-controlled characters. Indeed, *WoW* offers numerous game play features that allow individuals to find their own personalized flow zone, thus extending the appeal of the game to a wider audience.

[1.4] Yet beyond these similarities, one major difference between *WoW* and *fLOW* is that, in the case of the former, gamers have far more options for acting outside the game proper and expanding the "world" of *Warcraft*—from posting strategies on an online forum to writing an elaborate guide for how to quickly level your character, from forming a guild and producing an accompanying Web site to programming in the language of Lua to modify the *WoW* interface, creating useful add-ons that one can share with others. This type of fan extension falls under the rubric of participatory culture, where the consumers of old become the producers of new. Instead of simply consuming the world of *WoW*, the player participates in producing it or altering how

we encounter it. We might think of fan expansion as an overflow of the game proper, a kind of ultimate added-on challenge that players can choose to pursue.

[1.5] The possibilities inherent in participatory culture have recently spawned a significant amount of both academic and popular debate while the conclusions are still open to speculation and argument: Will such participation transform culture into a more open collaboration between mass media outlets and the producing public? Or will the force of capitalism exploit the productive energies of the populace for its own purposes and profit (Jenkins 2006a, 2006b)? Although I will not offer a solution to this complex question, I do want to briefly investigate participatory culture in the game community, focusing on how the experience of gaming potentially overflows into fan production, and how the forms of the games themselves feed into the forms of intrinsic motivation that drive participatory culture.

## 2. Mod culture

[2.1] In the gaming world, the question of participatory culture is often framed in terms of game modifications, or *mods*. A mod can be new artwork or character *skins* (custom graphics) that other players can download and use (a common practice with GT Interactive's *Unreal Tournament* [1999], a popular arena-based first-person-shooter [FPS] game where players compete against each other online). Other mods modify elements of a game to create useful new tools (for example, interface add-ons for WoW). Still others perform total conversions of a game, transforming it into an entirely new world (for example, the conversion of Valve's *Half-Life* [1998], a FPS based on a science fiction narrative, into *Counter-Strike* [2000], a tactical multiplayer game that pits a team of terrorists against a team of counterterrorists). Mods also can manipulate the game's code to disrupt the game play (for example, jodi.org, a net.art collective, created a number of unplayable mods of the early Apogee Software FPS *Wolfenstein 3D* [1992]). Although they are not necessarily mods proper, I might also mention fan games, which often port games to new platforms (for example, a two-dimensional, home-brew version of Valve's *Portal* [2007] for the Nintendo DS) or build on the narrative worlds of older games (for example, *The Silver Lining* by Phoenix Online Studios, a completely free, original game extending the defunct world of Sierra's *King's Quest* series [1984–1998]).

[2.2] The practice of fan modding is often analyzed as an unpaid activity that expands the content of a game, spreads its fan base, extends its profitable longevity in the market, and generally adds value to a product that a company then profits from. I think it is impossible to deny that fan-produced mods—with the possible exception of "art" mods that criticize the game they modify—create value for the parent companies whose games are being transformed. Such issues have been discussed in numerous

academic articles (de Peuter and Dyer-Witheford 2005; Kücklich 2005; Postigo 2003, 2007). Overall, fan-produced mods flow into the "content pool" (Postigo 2007:302) that emerges around and expands the original game; indeed, modding is (for the most part) free labor that ends up flowing into the surplus-value pools of the original game developers. For example, many of the add-ons produced for WoW provide significant resources to the player who uses them; they are vital aspects of the game produced for free by fans (figure 2). It is not unreasonable to state that without them WoW would have significantly fewer players and thus significantly less revenue.



**Figure 2.** *Advanced Trade Skill Window add-on (created by the player Slarti on the realm EU-Blackhand). This mod is used to help increase profession skills in World of Warcraft (Blizzard Entertainment, 2004). [View larger image.]*

[2.3] Many of the articles about game mods also contemplate the reasons why modders produce their works: for the fun of it, for reputation and ego boosts, for experience that might allow them to find employment within the gaming industry, for the connections and community that such productions offer, or for a form of artistic expression and sense of "owning" their work, which Postigo (2003) identifies as a potential form of nonalienated and enjoyable labor. Although clearly some modders are motivated by extrinsic rewards—especially those hoping to work within the game industry or hoping that their mod might eventually bring financial reward—it is often pointed out that many modders are motivated by deeper, intrinsic motivations. For example, Neil Rodrigues, a project manager for the company that created *The Silver Lining*, explains that volunteer workers find motivation in personal, internal sources: "[S]ince you're not getting paid to work, you must have an internal passion to enjoy what you do" (Skelton 2008). Modding games or creating fan games is thus a pleasurable labor of love. But what is the source of this pleasurable labor? Of this intrinsic motivation? What connections might it have to the gaming experience more generally? To unpack these questions, I return to the game *flow*.

---

### 3. *flow*

[3.1] If WoW (and its massive base of productive fans) stands as example of a macroscopic game where, invoking Tiziana Terranova's definition of free labor, the "consumption of culture is translated into productive activities that are pleurably embraced and at the same time often shamelessly exploited" (2000:36), *fIOW* is a small, microcosmic game that might have plenty of fans but offers extremely limited opportunities to expand its content pool. No, you can't mod *fIOW*. Yet *fIOW* is not just a game but a game created to embody a particular idea about game design. *fIOW* is a game *about* games. The theory that underlies the game stems from the work of Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi, a psychologist and sociologist who has written prolifically over the past 30 years about the "flow experience"—an experience that he identified in many activities, such as rock climbing, playing chess or basketball, performing surgery, or even having a good conversation (1975, 1990). For Csikszentmihalyi, the flow experience is an optimal experience where one is completely absorbed by an activity and experiences an affect of intense enjoyment—or, as some like to say, fun.

[3.2] Csikszentmihalyi studied the flow experience because for him it became the key to understanding the inner workings of intrinsic motivation and why people pursue certain activities for the sake of the activity itself. For example, why do rock climbers risk their lives in an activity that offers no monetary rewards? Why do people dedicate massive amounts of time to playing WoW? For Csikszentmihalyi, part of the answer lies within the nature of the activity itself. Throughout his career, he outlined and refined the basic properties that define flow-producing activities. For example, the activity should challenge us, but these challenges should be tuned to our current abilities. Moreover, the activity should allow for the development of skills, have clear goals and feedback, and perhaps cause us to lose track of how much time has passed.

[3.3] It is not difficult to see that these properties have a lot in common with the medium of video games. Indeed, early in his career Csikszentmihalyi wrote, "Games are obvious flow activities, and play is the flow experience *par excellence*" (1975:36–37). Thus, it is not surprising that today many video game designers draw upon Csikszentmihalyi's analysis of flow and play. Jenova Chen, one of the creators of *fIOW*, remarked that "most of today's video games deliberately include and leverage the... components of Flow" (2007:32).

[3.4] With the principles of flow refined, Csikszentmihalyi envisioned a society that would put these principles to use, a society in which all activities—even those traditionally thought of as work—would produce flow experiences. When our tasks and activities become more like games, he argued, life itself becomes more pleasurable and also more productive. Partly as a result of the rise of the video game medium, Csikszentmihalyi's vision is seemingly materializing, especially in the business world, where video games are being studied as models for organizing and managing labor in

order to increase worker productivity (an increase that is not necessarily accompanied by an increase in the size of the worker's paycheck). Even online games such as WoW have been investigated in this vein (Reeves et al. 2008). Indeed, methods for producing intrinsic motivation and sustaining it are gradually being channeled into the functioning of capitalism, just as they are being used to create games that sustain our interest in playing them.

## 4. Conclusion

[4.1] At some point while I worked at WoW and played at *fIOW*, it struck me that the intrinsic motivation reinforced by flow experiences during game play might harbor a complex connection to the unpaid labor of modding. Take WoW, for example. Interestingly, WoW entertains a peculiar relationship to labor: the repetitive, tedious tasks that players must undertake—to increase the level of their characters, collect resources such as gold, or find interesting and useful items—can take hundreds of hours of game play, play that increasingly strikes some gamers as work, especially those who have flowed through the process of leveling a character before. For these latter players, their skills after hundreds of hours of playing WoW far outweigh the challenges presented at the beginning of the game, so when they choose to start (or "roll") a new character, the possibilities for achieving flow experiences are reduced. The challenges at these lower levels are just not challenging anymore, and the process of leveling a new character can become boring and stale. For this reason, individuals and companies now exist that will do these tedious activities for you. For a real-world price, a player can purchase a character that someone else has labored to build. There are also illegal mods that will automate some of the tedious labor for you. Yes, while you work at your "real" job, a program running on your computer can work to collect gold for you in WoW.

[4.2] People pay for these services to bypass the time-consuming work necessary to unlock game content at higher levels, content that is often called the *endgame*—that is, the true *beginning* of the fun, as many fans claim. Yet the endgame for some players who seek new and higher challenges might ultimately become expanding WoW itself, perhaps by producing add-ons entirely of their own creation. As mentioned before, this expansion of the game might be the highest level that a player can achieve, the apogee of intrinsic motivation where the gamer moves to access other skills that he or she might have (such as writing, programming, or Web design) and to apply them through a transformation of the game (creating fanfic, a mod, or a dedicated fan site). Perhaps this is also a desire to extend the flow experience of a game: when the in-game challenges no longer match a player's skill level, or when the game has been mastered, the player might turn to other skills that he or she can

reinforce in relation to the game, which, in turn, transforms and enriches the game, potentially renewing the gamer's interest in playing.

[4.3] My point is a simple one: if the labor of modders is indeed driven by intrinsic motivations, by internal passions, one source of this motivation might stem from the playing of games themselves. It is not inconceivable that the intrinsic motivation to play games, reinforced by the design of the games themselves, overflows into the labor of modding. For example, if one of the principal results of "getting into the flow" while playing WoW (and *fIOW*, for that matter!) is the growth and expansion of one's character, is it inconceivable that this drive to expand one's character within the game overflows into the expansion of WoW itself through fan modification? When the expansion of one's character within the game meets its limit, does the intrinsic motivation that motivated playing the game bleed into the motivation that drives the free labor to expand and "grow" the game itself?

[4.4] Turning to games like *fIOW* and the work of thinkers such as Csikszentmihalyi will enrich our understanding of how intrinsic motivation is cultivated and how the forms of video games themselves are influencing new forms of labor and play in participatory culture. If we do not simply want to "go with the flow" as the forces of capitalism channel our enjoyment, our fun, our labors of love, and our intrinsic motivation into a profit stream for others, then we need to understand that video games are not just fun and games, that their methods for cultivating flow experiences and intrinsic motivation, while certainly enjoyable, are also transforming the world of work beyond the game.

---

## 5. Works cited

Chen, Jenova. 2007. Flow in games (and everything else). *Communications of the ACM* 50:31–43. [doi:10.1145/1232743.1232769]

Csikszentmihalyi, Mihaly. 1975. *Beyond boredom and anxiety: The experience of play in work and games*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.

Csikszentmihalyi, Mihaly. 1990. *Flow: The psychology of optimal experience*. New York: Harper Perennial.

de Peuter, Grieg, and Nick Dyer-Witthford. 2005. A playful multitude? Mobilising and counter-mobilising immaterial game labour. *Fibreculture Journal*, no. 5.

[http://journal.fibreculture.org/issue5/depeuter\\_dyerwitthford.html](http://journal.fibreculture.org/issue5/depeuter_dyerwitthford.html) (accessed November 8, 2008).

Jenkins, Henry. 2006a. *Convergence culture: Where old and new media collide*. New York: New York Univ. Press.

Jenkins, Henry. 2006b. *Fans, bloggers, and gamers: Exploring participatory culture*. New York: New York Univ. Press.

Kücklich, Julian. 2005. Precarious playbour: Modders and the digital games industry. *Fibreculture Journal*, no. 5. <http://journal.fibreculture.org/issue5/kucklich.html> (accessed November 8, 2008).

Postigo, Hector. 2003. From *Pong* to planet *Quake*: Post-industrial transitions from leisure to work. *Information, Communication and Society* 6:593–607. [doi:10.1080/1369118032000163277]

Postigo, Hector. 2007. Of mods and modders: Chasing down the value of fan-based digital game modifications. *Games and Culture* 2:300–13. [doi:10.1177/1555412007307955]

Reeves, Byron, Thomas Malone, and Tony O'Driscoll. 2008. Leadership's online labs. *Harvard Business Review* 86, no. 5:58–66. <http://cio.co.nz/cio.nsf/tech/E9AAD1FBA10D072CCC2574830010E2BE> [abridged] (accessed February 9, 2009).

Skelton, Cris. 2008. Steps to success in creating your own adventure game. *Adventure Classic Gaming*. <http://www.adventureclassicgaming.com/index.php/site/features/220/> (accessed January 30, 2009).

Terranova, Tiziana. 2000. Free labor: Producing culture for the digital economy. *Social Text* 63:33–58. [doi:10.1215/01642472-18-2\_63-33]