

Gaming the System: Digital Revisionism and the Video Game Console Industry

By

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Abstract

In my dissertation, I study how emergent practices in digital production and distribution create a site of conflict between media producers and their audience. I establish that as the cultural industries increasingly harness platformed technology and gain the ability to change media through streamlined updates and expansions, these changes have a corresponding effect on the norms of consumption and media cultures. To highlight the stakes of this conflict, I focus on the video game console industry as a case study that both demonstrates tensions between networked play and platform governance and a high degree of experimentation with digital media market practices. Amidst these evolving norms, I argue that the console industry demonstrates a reliance on what I call digital revisionism, wherein producers harness their control over digital media's capacity for change to finetune their games based on their audience's engagement, defend against controversies and perceived failures through the promised potential of updating, and commodify their products indefinitely through a game's expansion. In the meantime, audiences find themselves pushed further to the periphery of digital gaming but still work to influence these changes and challenge digital market practices through moments of galvanized controversy.

To outline my larger study on digital revisionism, I trace a historical arc from the console platforms' early adoption of internet connectivity—most principally through the closed-network platform launches of the Xbox 360 (2005) and PlayStation 3 (2006)—up to the present industrial moment in console gaming. While considering the game industry's growing use of digital change, I emphasize moments in which audiences attempt to push back on these practices and how the established norms of digital production and distribution have yet to fully settle. With that said, when audiences actively reject the game industry's production and distribution

practices—be it predatory microtransactions and loot boxes; broken and empty games; or troubling cultural representations of race, gender, and sexuality—the industry can also attempt to rewrite their failures through updates and expansion, while using these revisions to gain an understanding of their audience’s threshold of intolerance. In the process, each revised controversy around a game’s release threatens to wear the audience down and transform resistance into resignation.

Ultimately, I believe video games offer a salient demonstration of a broader set of practices around computational software and cultural industries, suggesting important comparisons to the use of digital flexibility in social media platforms, online search engines, streaming services, mobile apps, and a host of other industries that use digital distribution to obscure their own business practices and gain greater control over how we consume our media. My dissertation then seeks to underscore the stakes of digital media’s revisability and how media producers push audiences toward an acculturation for new digital media norms that leave them with less control over the very goods they purchase and use.

Acknowledgements

Roughly five years ago, toward the end of one of my many spring semesters at UW Madison, I was slowly recovering from a cold and sitting in Jeremy Morris' office. I had lost my voice and sounded ridiculous. I was also exhausted, stressed, and honestly a bit of a mess. I chose that inauspicious moment in my life to meet with Jeremy and discuss my academic future, because at that moment I was on the wrong track. Jeremy wasn't my advisor at the time. I wasn't even in his program. Instead, I had taken classes in the Media and Cultural Studies program as part of an intended minor for my PhD coursework. However, after taking excellent classes with both Jeremy and Derek Johnson, it became increasingly clear that I had accidentally discovered the way I wanted to learn about media and what I found so important about its academic inquiry. With that knowledge in hand, I scheduled a meeting with Jeremy and asked the very absurd question of whether it was even possible to change program tracks in the university's Communication Arts department. This dissertation is the result of Jeremy's initial response, which was characteristically expressed with patience, warmth, and thoughtful consideration even as he essentially told me 'I honestly have no idea. Let's find out!'

While I've highlighted my discussion with Jeremy as the catalyst for my dissertation's origin story, the truth is I owe everyone in both my previous program and my current program an enormous debt of gratitude. I don't have to tell anyone who's reading this that graduate school is a long, difficult, and deeply strange process where you are not only trying to learn from different academic traditions but to also find your own voice as a scholar. I am thankful that the professors here at UW Madison have put such care and attention into helping me through that discovery. Additionally, despite coming into the Media and Cultural Studies program through highly unusual circumstances, I was not only instantly welcomed by both the professors and my fellow

graduate students (once I assured everyone that I wasn't secretly a spy for another program), but I also received constant advice and guidance as I worked to catch up with a new field.

First and foremost, then, I want to thank my advisor Jeremy Morris for his encouragement, his unflagging efforts to field all my anxious questions, and for helping me stay so passionate about what I have been studying for years now. His open and thoughtful approach to academic writing, advising, service, and teaching has been foundational in guiding my own work and I will be thrilled if I can manage to emulate even a fraction of that approach in my career. I want to thank Derek Johnson, who was also on the ground floor of advising me through this transition in my academic studies and has always helped me to think through what's most important for me to communicate as both a writer and a teacher. I could easily argue that his endlessly fascinating game studies course offers an origin story for this dissertation as well, since it gave me the framework to start to conceive this project, and his careful, probing questions have led me to reexamine my ideas in ways that are always generative and rewarding.

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Introduction

“It seems impossible to know the extent, content, and effects of new media. Who can touch the entire contents of the World Wide Web or know the real size of the Internet or mobile networks?”¹

- Wendy Chun, *Programmed Visions: Software and Memory*

“The game industry is a perfect example of the contemporary post-Fordist “weightless” economy at work, typified by a metalogic of instantaneous, experiential, fluid, flexible, heterogeneous, customized, portable, yet also fashionable and stylish products and productivity.”²

- Mark Deuze, *Media Work*

As digital technology increasingly structures our everyday lives, we must struggle to understand the underlying framework of hardware, software, and networked connectivity as online media moves further into obscurity with each innovation. Over the past two decades, digital technology has provoked far-reaching change in media industries like music, film, television, and video games as producers experiment with new economic models and take full advantage of online networks. At the same time, the sheer complexity of new media creates a context in which audiences cannot always grasp the underlying mechanisms for digital production and distribution, contributing to a host of issues around free labor, data mining, and

¹ Wendy Hui Kyong Chun, *Programmed Visions: Software and Memory* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 2011), 1.

² Mark Deuze, *Media Work* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2007), 209.

the intense and even transformative commodification of our cultural industries.³ Digital technology also revises itself constantly through updates and the forced obsolescence of hardware and software, ensuring that our understanding of digital objects is only ever partial and can become outdated at the industry's whim. Audiences must then resolve the ways that digital commodities redefine themselves constantly and can even change in ways that contradict their earlier use value. And yet, these digital shifts simultaneously create opportunities for audiences to take ownership over these texts in ways not previously possible and redefine media for themselves.⁴ Under these circumstances, new media studies frequently center around a site of contestation between producers and consumers, with each attempting to use digital affordances to bring media more firmly under their control.

While a conflict over the control of digital change is an important starting point for discussing new media, I seek to push beyond the idea that producers and consumers simply remain in a holding pattern wherein each party has equal opportunity to exert influence over a text. Instead, I argue that as the norms of new media industries have codified, producers have become more adept at taking advantage of the technology's flexibility, working to foreclose or harvest the creative energy of audience interventions in progressively intricate ways. In the process, the audience is pushed further toward the periphery of digital media and must find new methods for reasserting their control, particularly through galvanized moments of controversy. Furthermore, I argue that new media's capacity for revision itself complicates the ways in which media industries and audiences interact, as industry producers gain the ability to make changes

³ Mark Andrejevic, *Infoglut: How Too Much Information Is Changing the Way We Think and Know* (London: Routledge, 2013); Martin Dodge and Rob Kitchin, *Code/Space: Software and Everyday Life* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 2011); Richard A. Rogers, *Digital Methods* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 2013).

⁴ Henry Jenkins, *Convergence Culture: Where Old and New Media Collide* (New York: New York University Press, 2006); Henry Jenkins, Mizuko Ito, and danah boyd, *Participatory Culture in a Networked Era: A Conversation on Youth, Learning, Commerce, and Politics* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2016).

not just after their products have been released but *while* they are being used, effectively allowing producers to reinvent media within the course of its reception. In this dissertation, I highlight these tensions in digital production, distribution, and reception by studying the video game console industry.

Gaming provides a useful case for new media studies due to how often audiences engage with the medium as both a technology and a form of entertainment. The industry even purposefully conflates these considerations when launching new consoles and computer models as showcases of graphic and gameplay advancements. Specifically, hardware marketing will highlight computational specs like processing power and RAM as a direct correlate to the new kinds of games developers can make for their audience. Not surprisingly, the consolidated interests of play and technology encouraged forms of audience participation in which gamers played *with* technology to change the game itself. As gaming culture evolved, numerous modding communities emerged in the PC game market as savvy players altered a game's code to assert their own creative agency over a text and then distributed the changes to others online. With that said, the console industry's own incorporation of online gaming has limited the potential use of online networks and foreclosed audience interventions through streamlined computing platforms and constant firmware updates. Using a black box technological framework, which pushes the user away from the software's code and toward a more prescriptive platform interface, producers can then harness the productivity of gaming communities without losing control of the game as a cultural product. As the console industry has gained greater control over digital gaming, they have also co-opted the modding community standard of a perpetually open-ended text. At the same time, they work to acculturate audiences to accept the digital norms of impermanence and constant commodification as a fixed feature of gaming.

In my dissertation, I trace a historical arc from the console industry's early adoption of network connectivity—most directly through the console launches of the Xbox 360 (2005) and PlayStation 3 (2006)—up to the present industrial moment. I first focus on how the console industry adopted online platforms and consider the ways in which players can still express creativity and participate in co-production practices in these more constrained spaces. From there, I analyze how the console industry has evolved over time to privilege the producer's use of digital add-ons over the user's ability to augment their games and tie the console's new digital marketplace to gameplay functionality. At first, developers used marketplace downloadable content (DLC) to sell add-on expansions to an already finished text. However, they quickly began to see DLC as a distribution strategy that could integrate more fully with the text's release and developed season pass subscriptions, in-game economies, and microtransaction structures to create games that were often dependent in some way on the digital market. This became particularly important as developers worked to calibrate predatory microtransaction systems and service model gameplay appeals that could incentivize players to continually invest in a game in order to fully participate in online spaces or get the most of a game's experience.

Developers likewise used the console's network functionality to update games based on industry pressures and the audience's reception. In the online console era, we can see early examples of incomplete games sent to the market that were made complete through updates either because the publishers were rushing to hit an advantageous release date or because they were simply relying on reception to guide the preferred path of development. The growing trend of day-one patches, in which developers make a series of code adjustments in the intervening time between sending a game to the market and having it arrive in the player's hands, has only exacerbated the situation as many developers have cut corners on quality assurance or have

pushed the technological limits of a game too far, releasing broken and bug filled games to their audience that could take months to fix. As these strategies have developed over time, audiences have pushed back against new industry norms particularly as unfinished games and overt microtransaction systems fundamentally change the players' relationship to the text itself and the industry. However, the use of updates ensures that game producers can attempt to rewrite this failure and continually negotiate for gaming's new terms of digital distribution.

By establishing a clear timeline for this technological change, I hope to demonstrate how the industry slowly developed market strategies around their newfound control and flexibility in digital distribution using marketplace DLC, in-game economies, and updates. I argue that the industry's ability to change a text at will without concern of direct audience intervention eventually cultivated norms around what I have called a process of *digital revisionism*, in which companies can use audience engagement, a game's overall reception, and popular trends in the industry to finetune and commodify their products indefinitely. Meanwhile, moments in which audiences actively reject the norms of the industry through the features of a specific game—be it predatory microtransactions and loot boxes; broken and empty games; or troubling cultural representations of race, gender, and sexuality—create opportunities for the industry to simply rewrite their failures through updates and use these revisions to gain an understanding of their audience's current threshold of intolerance. In the process, each revised controversy around a game's release threatens to wear the audience down and transform an expression of dislike or outrage to one of resignation.

Critically, video games sit at a nexus between technological innovation and media consumption, prompting us to consider the larger implications of digital change in media studies. How do systematic distribution strategies emerge from the seemingly volatile nature of digital

revisionism and its constant reconfigurations? In what ways do the cultural industries use the idea of impermanence to reinforce troubling ideologies and practices? And what agency do audiences have to influence new media, even as industry producers work to streamline and obscure its technological features? Ultimately, I believe video games offer a salient demonstration of a broader set of practices around computational software and cultural industries, suggesting important comparisons to the use of digital affordances in social media platforms, online search engines, mobile apps, Web 2.0 technologies, and so on. Of course, not all digital change should be cast in a light of increasing obscurity and corporate influence and there are ways in which the industry's ability to revise itself could point to the potential for audiences to force the issue, knowing full well that the industry *could* change if properly incentivized. However, it remains important to consider the limitations and technological constraints that often characterize digital change and the difficulty of understanding the scale and scope at which digital revisionism takes place.

Establishing a Conceptual Framework for Digital Revisionism

Throughout my dissertation, I build on my core concept of digital revisionism with each chapter and case study, while ultimately describing the term in two parts: the process of revising a digital text through updates and expansions and broader efforts to revise expectations and cultures surrounding that text. By focusing on the game industry as a core case study, I highlight how we can think of digital revisionism in the context of update cultures on volatile receptions, in which the industry's use of change can be considered a means to not only update the game but also rehabilitate the reception surrounding the game. Similarly, I argue that we can view add-ons and in-game economies in a service model games not only as a process of updating the game itself but also the culture of its gameplay. In this way, I set up my term to speak to the larger

complexity of digital change and the ways in which media's revisions change its use and cultural context.

The concepts and theories that inform and structure my argument on digital revisionism and the video game console industry draw from a diverse range of interdisciplinary research, as my work considers online gaming within the fields of software and platform studies, game industry analysis, political economy theory, and audience and fan studies. By considering digital gaming's technological affordances, the industry's evolving norms of production and distribution, and the increasing volatility and unpredictability of game receptions, I seek to capture the complexity of a game industry that constantly reinvents itself through platform governance, digital expansion, and update cultures. Meanwhile, I explore how these changes in digital gaming create tensions between the industry and its audience as players face evolving norms in gaming culture, including challenges to a broader range of potential participation, the increasing commodification and labor of digital gaming, and the growing turmoil in game receptions as a game's streamlined updates allow industry revisions well after a game is released to the public. By considering digital revisionism through the lens of gaming technology, production histories, and the dynamic between the industry and its audience, I demonstrate the broader historical and cultural context for how cultural industries make and then remake new media and how audiences experience these revisions as an inherent part of their media consumption.

Studying new media presents unique challenges not only because network affordances and software's revisability allow companies to change digital texts at will but also because their use of versioned releases is not always a clear or transparent process. In his attempt to establish *The Language of New Media* (2001), Lev Manovich builds on new media's incorporation of

software's modular design to discuss the central characteristics of *variability*, as “networks allow the content of a new media object to be periodically updating while keeping its structure intact”, and *scalability*, “in which different versions of the same media object can be generated at various sizes or levels of detail.”⁵ This description critically highlights not only how digital change can seamlessly take place within new media but also foreshadows the degree to which these changes can work at a scale that makes understanding digital change incredibly difficult for the average user. For instance, a game may be updated dozens of times over the course of its release and those changes can be buried within pages of dense, technically complex patch notes or happen at such an incremental pace from one version to the next that the full scope of a game's revision may not clearly register. Meanwhile, Florian Cramer and Matthew Fuller note how the use of an interface simplifies more complicated software systems, writing “within the paradigm of ‘user-friendliness,’ that which is most easily recognizable and visible, software has been traditionally understood to place the user as its subject, and the computational patterns and elements initiated, used, and manipulated by the user as the corresponding grammatical objects.”⁶ In other words, the very nature of digital media stresses ease of use over technical understanding and streamlines and normalizes changes made to the experience. In some ways, these features reflect a necessity for companies to present a mass audience with a legible media experience despite varying technical literacies. However, these characteristics can also empower producers to make changes that do not always register with their audience and denote the impression of impermanence when they do.

⁵ Lev Manovich, *The Language of New Media* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 2001), 57-58.

⁶ Florian Cramer and Matthew Fuller, “Interface,” *Software Studies: A Lexicon*, ed. Matthew Fuller (Cambridge: MIT Press, 2008), 151.

Traditionally, digital media's flexibility has allowed developers to make constant adjustments to a text after its release and overwrite failures and shortcomings in their code. Martin Dodge and Rob Kitchin observe that developers often address errors in software by releasing an initial version to the public and then correcting issues discovered through its use with updates and patches. They go on to write that "these imperfections in terms of bugs, glitches, and crashes are at once notorious and yet also largely accepted as a routine dimension of computation."⁷ As software grows increasingly complex, developers rely more on this strategy due to the difficulty of discovering coding errors solely through in-house beta testing and quality assurance. Developers must then strike a balance between maintaining an intuitive user-experience and rewriting the text based on that use. By applying these observations in software studies to the video game industry, I argue that this tendency toward post-release updates has led to new distribution strategies in which developers make up for poor quality assurance and the negative receptions of games by using audience backlash and general complaints as a catalyst for new updates. The industry then relies on the audience's growing recognition of digital revisionism in the process, pushing the boundaries for what might constitute a 'routine dimension of computation'.

While new media industries develop strategies to take advantage of digital flexibility and subtly acculturate their audience toward the norms of revisionism, they have also designed media hardware and software to purposefully close off user interventions and ensure that this flexibility does not easily extend to the audience. Jonathan Zittrain details this process with a comparison between the Apple II personal computer and the first version of the iPhone (which was closed to third-party developers):

⁷ Dodge and Kitchen (2011), 37.

The Apple II was quintessentially generative technology. It was a platform. It invited people to tinker with it. [...] The iPhone is the opposite. It is sterile. Rather than a platform that invites innovation, the iPhone comes preprogrammed. [...] Its functionality is locked in, though Apple can change it through remote updates. Indeed, to those who managed to tinker with the code to enable the iPhone to support more or different applications, Apple threatened (and then delivered on the threat) to transform the iPhone into an iBrick.⁸

The transition detailed here from generative to sterile technology helps to outline not just an issue specific to Apple's devices but a larger trend in digital media and online appliances to take firm control over the affordances of updating. Zittrain later describes this trend within the context of *contingency* in which "updates come from only one source, with a model of product development limited to non-user innovation."⁹ Much like with the transition between the Apple II and iPhone, I believe the video game industry can offer a revealing case study in part because the console industry's adoption of online affordances follows a very similar deviation from the earlier precedent of PC online gaming. As console producers develop their hardware to capitalize on contingency and limit 'non-user innovation', they can then take firm control over the inherent flexibility of updating and expansions and use that control to support their own capitalist interests and hegemonic positioning in the broader sphere of gaming culture.

The game industry provides a useful template for exploring the affordances of software and online platforms in part because video games have always been a *digital* product. In fact, Seth Gidding and Helen W. Kennedy write that video games are a "paradigmatic new medium in that they offer experiences and pleasures based in the interactive and immersive possibilities of

⁸ Jonathan Zittrain, *The Future of the Internet: And How to Stop It* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2008), 2.

⁹ Ibid. 106.

computer technologies.”¹⁰ With that said, the digital turn in the media industries still has relevance for gaming because the incorporation of Internet connectivity offers a clear point of disruption, especially for the video game home console industry. Once console producers gained the ability to continually use software’s variability and scalability to adapt a game after its release, the industry’s digital appeals could then extend beyond interactivity and immersion to take advantage of the inherent renewal and refinement of the gaming experience through built-in expansions and updates.

The promise of digital renewal aligned with the game industry’s efforts to sell gaming’s future within the context of producing obsolescence. In the history of both console and PC gaming, industry producers have used planned and forced obsolescence to sell new hardware, new games, and convince audiences to constantly buy into the industry even at the expense of enjoying the games they already own. James Newman argues that “the promise of the platform sees it operating at the boundary of the future and present of gaming as it maps out the next generation from a position that renders obsolete the once-new.”¹¹ Similarly, Devin Monnens points to the tension between what gaming technology *could* allow and how the industry curtails the ‘once-new’ through a lack of technological support:

When old media are replaced, there are no longer systems to support them, and they will not run on the latest software and hardware platforms. As a result, even if the medium on which a game’s data is stored is able to last a hundred years, after only a fraction of that time, its data will be unreadable in the latest hardware and software environments.¹²

¹⁰ Seth Gidding and Helen W. Kennedy, “Digital Games as New Media,” *Understanding Digital Games*, eds. Jason Rutter and Jo Bryce (London: SAGE Publications, 2006): 112.

¹¹ James Newman, *Best Before: Videogames, Supersession and Obsolescence* (London: Routledge, 2012), 56.

¹² Devin Monnens, “Losing Digital Game History, Bit by Bit,” *Before It’s Too Late: A Digital Game Preservation Paper*, Ed. Henry Lowood, *American Journal of Play* (2009): 143.

Notably, the production of obsolescence is not an inherently digital process, but the affordances of updating can similarly rewrite the present of a media text with the evocation of future versioning. New media's standard for constant updates then dovetails with the market expectations for obsolescence, pushing the audience to accept media as an experiential commodity.

The video game industry's consistent use of updating and digital expansions similarly aligns with their growing reliance on a service model approach to game development. Historically, games have needed to be predominantly static media objects that arrived to their audiences as a fully-formed experience. In fact, even when PC gaming began to experiment with Internet connectivity and digital expansions, the limited data connections created an obstacle for developers to truly remake a game or expand on that game without an additional physical release—such as the PC industry's use of CD-ROM expansion packs or even the arcade industry's use of conversion kits. However, as digital gaming evolved, industry producers increasingly experimented with creating a service model, wherein they could renew their game's overall appeal to an established audience. Aphra Kerr argues that “with the development of games as a service approach, production and circulation is changing [...] [as] production updates and expansions continue throughout the lifecycle of the service.”¹³ This ability to continue the gaming experience then not only marks a distinct shift in how producers make their games but also how they establish a game's inherent value and appeal as one of renewal.

With that said, I believe the game industry's use of digital revisionism must also account for how the console industry has deviated from their PC game industry counterpart to establish a culture of expansions and updates within the context of Zittrain's contingent commodity. As

¹³ Aphra Kerr, *Global Games: Production, Circulation and Policy in the Networked Era* (London: Routledge, 2017), 15.

Zittrain points out: “Microsoft’s Xbox 360 video game console is a powerful computer, but, unlike Microsoft’s Windows operating system for PCs, it does not allow just anyone to write software that can run on it.”¹⁴ Similarly, David Nieborg and Thomas Poell observe that:

Digital games, arguably more so than many other types of cultural commodities, have been platform dependent from their inception. Because games are component-based software, their malleability and modularity allow for easy upgrading, extension, and recirculation, all of which play into the contingent nature of the cultural commodity.¹⁵

In the PC gaming industry, the hardware’s malleability and modularity not only applied to industry producers but to players and hobbyists who sought to participate in media production and intervene on these digital texts through a burgeoning culture of online game modding. However, if digital games constitute a paradigmatic new media they naturally could support a technological foundation for contingent control, so long as the industry could develop hardware in a way that privileged the industry’s ability to incorporate these changes. The console industry’s shift toward online production and distribution would then be marked by a persistent reliance on that unidirectional contingency.

When developers apply more control over a digital text after its release, the text can remain in a near constant state of commoditization. Arjun Appadurai writes that commodities have a “*total* trajectory from production, through exchange/distribution, to consumption” and describes this process as a commodity situation in which an object can, at any point in its life cycle, transition into and out of a commoditized state.¹⁶ Appadurai’s work builds in turn on Igor

¹⁴ Zittrain (2008), 3.

¹⁵ David B. Nieborg and Thomas Poell, “The Platformization of Cultural Productions: Theorizing the Contingent Cultural Commodity,” *New Media & Society* 20, no. 11 (2018): 4277

¹⁶ Arjun Appadurai, “Introduction: Commodities and the Politics of Value,” *The Social Life of Things: Commodities in Cultural Perspective*, ed. Arjun Appadurai (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1986), 13.

Kopytoff's theories on creating a cultural biography of things as a process of commoditization wherein the author writes:

The exchange function of every economy appears to have a built-in force that drives the exchange system toward the greatest degree of commodization that the exchange technology permits. The counterforces are cultural and the individual, with their drive to discriminate, classify, compare, and sacralize. This means a two-front battle for culture as for the individual—one against the commoditization as a homogenizer of exchange values, the other against the utter singularization of things as they are in nature.¹⁷

In Kopytoff's conception of the commodity, he perceives the commodified object's life cycle as a point of contestation in which exchange systems work to accelerate the forms of commoditization as much as technology allows while audiences attempt to make the commoditized object their own. Appadurai's elaboration on the commodity situation then complicates this idea of the cultural biography of things as it allows for the possibility that commodities can transition back into a commoditized state. Within these two intersecting points of view, we might then consider how new media objects like video games can blur the lines between production, distribution, and consumption as each new update or expansion alters the way a product is consumed and delivers a new experience and renewed life cycle of the commodity to its audience.

As video games push the boundaries of the commodity life cycle, they work to intensify their use of perpetual innovation in the process. As Arun Kundnani explains:

Since the industrial revolution, growth under capitalism has depended on the ability of firms to bring new products to market and to find new techniques of production; in short,

¹⁷ Igor Kopytoff, "The Cultural Biography of Things: Commoditization as Process," *The Social Life of Things: Commodities in Cultural Perspective*, ed. Arjun Appadurai (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1986), 87.

on innovation. With the trade in information, the need to innovate reaches a new intensity. Ideas, styles, and knowledge have a limited lifespan and, as capital builds more and faster circuits for information to flow through [...], this lifespan decreases.¹⁸

Similarly, Stephen Kline, et al. observe that the video game industry “seeks to maintain continual expansion by generating a ceaseless stream of new commodities” and accelerates the timeline of this ‘stream’ through a post-Fordist standard of perpetual innovation.¹⁹ In this context, we can view video game innovations of DLC add-ons, updates, in-game economies, and microtransaction systems as ways for the industry to keep the video game commodity open and in a position to price a user back into a consumerist role repeatedly and, at times, indefinitely.

The video game industry’s ability to renew a game’s commodified status through expansions or their use of large-scale updates to perpetually innovate a game has an impact on how players experience gaming as a broader culture. In some cases, we can consider the industry’s digital interventions as a kind of interpolation and exaggeration of a game’s commodification. To this end, Miguel Sicart discusses capitalism’s co-option of gaming and play as a means of control, “but a type of control that is accepted in the surrender of its subjects to the inescapable logic of capital,” largely due to how “capital turns play into an instrument that camouflages the cooperation with its logics.”²⁰ Furthermore, these shifts in the digital gaming industry do not just intensify and transform the capitalist appeals of gaming but they also challenge the notion of ownership, as the game industry subtly shifts not only to a service model

¹⁸ Arun Kundnani, “Where Do You Want to Go Today? The Rise of Information Capital,” *Race & Class* 40 (1 March 1999): 57.

¹⁹ Stephen Kline, Greig De Peuter, and Nick Dyer-Witheford, *Digital Play: The Interaction of Technology, Culture, and Marketing* (Québec City: McGill-Queen’s University Press, 2003), 66-67.

²⁰ Miguel Sicart, “Playful Capitalism, or Play as an Instrument of Capitalism,” *Contracampo: Brazilian Journal of Communication* 40, no.2 (2021): 6.

but also to a rental-based market logic through its use of online contingency. Tim Jordan emphasizes this at times difficult to perceive difference in his larger study of digital economies:

Games bring to the fore the shift a number of scholars have traced when arguing that digital economies often substitute renting a commodity for owning it, even if they appear to be offering that commodity for sale. [...] If you have bought a game that requires online connection, and nearly all games now do, then this means you can be banished from the game any time the owner of the platform feels that it is necessary.²¹

Once again, the black box technological framework of the game console and its use of contingency then offers a means to harness a specific kind of player engagement. However, I argue that the console industry has not just worked to close off user-based interventions but has also co-opted community standards from the more open-ended PC gaming platform and learned from the industry's response to that system's player-based modding culture.

The initial advent of digital media created new opportunities for participation and led to a growing complexity and breadth of remix cultures as audiences found ways to repurpose a text through fan-edits, software modding, memes, and so on. These transformative works align with Henry Jenkins' discussion of textual poaching in which he describes a social class of fans who work to construct both their own culture and community through the appropriation of texts.²² In this case, the literal *poaching* of materials and their recontextualization provides audiences with an opportunity to imbue new meaning into media objects they may have previously found wanting in some way. Similarly, Axel Bruns celebrates a new era of the produser (a hybrid of producer and user) as digital media changes the flow of consumption where an audience member is "no longer merely an end user of fixed products, but gains the ability (usually in a strictly

²¹ Tim Jordan, *The Digital Economy* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2020), 107-108.

²² Henry Jenkins, *Textual Poachers: Television Fans and Participatory Culture* (London: Routledge, 1992), 3.

limited, prescribed fashion) to alter the products purchased, according to the user's own preferences."²³ In these cases, the audience gains new agency and can potentially challenge the ideological assumptions of mass-produced media or at least change it to suit their needs.

Despite the optimistic tone of these discussions on new media, the opportunities afforded by digital distribution have also allowed the industry to channel audience enthusiasm and energy in advantageous ways. In Jenkins' later work on convergence culture, he highlights that tension between producers and consumers by writing:

Convergence [...] is both a top-down corporate-driven process and a bottom-up consumer-driven process. Media companies are learning how to accelerate the flow of media content across delivery channels to expand revenue opportunities, broaden markets, and reinforce viewer commitments. Consumers are learning how to use these different media technologies to bring the flow of media more fully under their control and to interact with other consumers.²⁴

Derek Johnson complicates this idea further, commenting that in gaming "participatory culture drags consumers deeper into capitalist industrial structures, asking them to take up affectively meaningful subjectivities within institutions of media production, at the same time as it points to alternatives outside of that system."²⁵ By observing how the console industry uses digital technology, we can further demonstrate that these tensions have slowly favored producers more often than consumers as the industry learns from PC gaming culture and harvests audience activities in ways that repurpose user creativity.

²³ Axel Bruns, *Blogs, Wikipedia, Second Life and Beyond: From Production to Produsage* (New York: Peter Lang, 2008), 11.

²⁴ Henry Jenkins, *Convergence Culture: Where Old and New Media Collide* (New York: New York University Press, 2006), 18.

²⁵ Derek Johnson, *Media Franchising: Creative License* (New York: New York University Press, 2013), 205.

In the past, much of the academic discourse on video game audiences has emphasized PC gaming culture and the tension between the creative agency of modding communities and industry efforts to both control and benefit from this audience-driven activity. In more encouraging case studies, authors point to ways that modding can serve activist or otherwise progressive agendas. For instance, Greig De Peuter and Nick Dyer-Witheford note how modding communities have used the framework of military first-person shooters to criticize the underlying assumptions of the military-industrial complex and ways the original games might reinforce those ideologies.²⁶ Mia Consalvo studies how fan modders and translators bring games from Japan to other countries when the industry has already decided against international distribution, fostering a new cultural appreciation and fan community for these neglected titles.²⁷ In these examples, the ability for gaming communities to engage with a text's source material affords them the opportunity to assert their own values on a text and, at times, challenge the ideological and economic imperatives of the industry.

Although these interventions have led to a rich gaming culture around online modding, authors like Hector Postigo and Julian Kücklich have outlined ways in which producers work to co-opt this creative activity. As Postigo argues:

The fact that game development companies invest in providing fans with development tools, server space, and level editors attests to their understanding of the power of a fan community in prolonging the life of a game. For third-party companies that host servers, a technologically productive fan base acts as a revenue pool by providing engaging

²⁶ Greig De Peuter and Nick Dyer-Witheford, *Games of Empire: Global Capitalism and Video Games* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2009).

²⁷ Mia Consalvo, *Atari to Zelda: Japan's Videogames in Global Contexts* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 2016).

content (in the form of novel user-designed maps, for example) that many gamers can access for team play, thus ensuring consistent advertising dollars.²⁸

Kücklich takes this observation a step further by defining modding practices as a form of playbor in which modders do not necessarily “own” their modifications and companies can distribute them and benefit financially from their use while modders are encouraged to view their labor as a form of play. Kücklich goes on to write that “modding’s uncertain status in respect to traditional notions of work and leisure, the deprivation of modders of their intellectual property rights, the game industry’s outsourcing of risk to the modding community and the ideological masking of modding as a collaborative process [...] make modding appear a very precarious form of labour indeed.”²⁹ With that said, I believe that just as the PC gaming industry found its own way to transform modding into free labor and as added value for their products, the console industry benefited from their delay to incorporate an online network and since evolved in divergent ways to harness user participation through their networked control of gaming.

As the console industry developed online functionality and actively stymied the user’s ability to hack a game’s software and distribute those changes online, they likewise developed distribution strategies that took the expansion logic of PC modding and converted it into added content in their digital marketplace. While Postigo, Kücklich, and others aptly point out that the PC modders developing maps, cosmetic skins, and other digital expansions could increase a game’s value, their additions were still typically free to the public and demonstrated a degree of user agency—even if the industry’s implementation of strict user agreements and the users’ growing reliance on developer-made modding software limited the range of their free expression.

²⁸ Hector Postigo, “Of Mods and Modders: Chasing Down the Value of Fan-based Digital Game Modifications,” *Games and Culture* 2, no. 4 (2007): 302.

²⁹ Julian Kücklich, “Precarious Playbour: Modders and the Digital Games Industry,” *The Fibreculture Journal* 5 (2005), np, <http://five.fibreculturejournal.org/fcj-025-precarious-playbour-modders-and-the-digital-games-industry/>.

In the console industry, these smaller add-ons have become part of the game development process itself and are tied to DLC purchases, in-game economies, and microtransaction systems. Indeed, many developers have experimented with increasingly complicated in-game economies tied to both cosmetic changes and skill upgrades that encourage users to “pay to play” or pay to express themselves online through changes to their avatar. Consequently, the console industry takes PC modding innovations—expanding gameplay features and reveling in the personal expression of cosmetic skins—and directly commodifies what could previously be considered a form of textual poaching.

These changes also impact the overall relationship between gamers and the text. If the PC industry encouraged user-based productivity within terms that benefitted the producers, console gaming removed the uncertainty that comes with user production and tightened control over a game’s digital commodification. In the process, the audience finds itself pushed further from the material code of the text and direct participation in its creation. However, as much as the console audience might seem displaced compared to their PC gaming cognate, their continued engagement with these texts allows developers to cultivate new distribution strategies around game receptions and the desire for many fans to be heard by the industry. When producers push for these new digital norms of engagement, their audience can then either participate in highly circumscribed ways within the industry or vie for influence at the online fringes.

As gaming culture continues to evolve in this new digital context, some users willingly embrace a form of media engagement that complies with the industry’s network of control. In these cases, gamers often perform their fandom as free labor through beta testing, reporting on bugs and errors for game developers, and even supporting developers over controversies involving specific games. Mel Stanfill and Megan Condis outline how some of these activities

are encouraged, writing “[video game] companies routinely emphasize the benefits and prestige associated with early access: alpha and beta testers are said to have the ear of game makers, to be influential in shaping the final product.”³⁰ Additionally, online communication creates other opportunities for developers to imply that individuals can be heard by industry professionals, as developer-hosted message boards and discord feeds provide a highly curated forum with which to direct audience expectations and, at times, ameliorate frustrations concerning a specific game or the industry’s broader distribution practices.

I believe these moments of constraint remain integral to our understanding of both video games and the cultural industries at large but they also capture an incomplete picture. Even as some gamers accept digital revisionism as a new standard, others push back against unfavorable distribution strategies through moments of audience backlash. For example, when broken games lacking proper quality assurance enter the market, many users ‘review-bomb’ the titles on popular sites like Metacritic and Steam in an attempt to impact the initial sales of the game and encourage the industry to change their overall approach to production. Audiences have also organized mass-refund requests to contest a lack of adequate gameplay in ‘empty games’ and censured digital add-ons that crassly commercialize cultural identities or otherwise reinforce troubling ideologies. In these moments, the flash points of controversy allow disparate gamers to rally around a specific and timely cause and exert their influence on the industry.

Notably, the majority of academic research on audiences neglect such expressions of dislike, outrage, and backlash by emphasizing a more affirmative discussion of fan activity. However, Jonathan Gray makes a useful intervention in this discourse by highlighting the roles of nonfans and anti-fans, writing that “by focusing so intently on the fan, reception studies are

³⁰ Mel Stanfill and Megan Condis, “Fandom and/as Labor,” *Transformative Works and Cultures* Vol. 15 (2014), <https://journal.transformativeworks.org/index.php/twc/article/view/593/421>.

distorting our understanding of the text, the consumer and the interaction between them.”³¹

Additionally, Gray and Sarah Murray develop the discussion of audience animus beyond just an augmentation of fandom, arguing that “studies of textual hate and dislike may help us reveal what *obstacles* audiences see in the mediascape.”³² For my research, I believe studying what audiences perceive to be obstacles in the game industry and how they attempt to push back against them offers an illuminating perspective on the emergent norms of digital media engagement. With that said, I am not invested in these expressions of dislike because they *necessarily* lead to meaningful changes in the industry—oftentimes they do not and audiences push against industry norms with only fleeting moments of success. However, I believe they mark a reconfiguration of how audiences view their role as video game consumers and prompt conflicts that the industry must find new ways to resolve.

Finally, my study will account for how the changing norms of online discussions and community formations impact the ability for audience members to advance a unified agenda that might force the game industry to respond. Whitney Phillips and Ryan Milner have characterized online expression as a multitude of increasingly divergent behaviors and motivations, creating an *ambivalent internet*. They go on to state how conflict and unity are intertwined in moments of online hostility, writing that these terms are “far from diametrically opposed; even when the goals are unitary for some, behavior in the service of that unity can easily veer toward the antagonization of others.”³³ In regard to gaming controversies, these moments of backlash can unify audiences to a degree but that process remains turbulent and there are no clear

³¹ Jonathan Gray, “New Audiences, New Textualities: Anti-Fans and Non-Fans,” *International Journal of Cultural Studies* Vol. 6.1 (2003), 68.

³² Jonathan Gray and Sarah Murray, “Hidden: Studying Media Dislike and its Meaning,” *International Journal of Cultural Studies* Vol. 19.4 (2015), 362.

³³ Whitney Phillips and Ryan M. Milner, *The Ambivalent Internet: Mischief, Oddity, and Antagonism Online* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2017), 170.

circumstances that would guarantee sustained audience engagement. In the meantime, industry producers can learn from audience backlash, use the digital impermanence of their game to address *some* concerns, and ultimately work to normalize their larger production and distribution practices by constantly revising controversy and abating dissent.

Despite the broad implications of the industrial shift in video game distribution and the changing norms of audience participation, few have written on how this dynamic has evolved in the console industry and the ways these changes reflect larger patterns in new media. In my dissertation, I use video games to help illustrate new contours forming between audience engagement and industrial control, while also working to understand how lasting change occurs amidst a technological framework of impermanence. Ultimately, this study outlines how normative consumption patterns emerge, ways that user experience with media changes based on corporate distribution trends, how gaming culture itself becomes commodified, and what agency the audience might still have in this digital climate. In the process, my dissertation outlines a greater understanding of the remaining ways we can meaningfully participate with and influence digital texts amidst the shifting sands of our media culture.

Methodology

While digital revisionism offers a foundational consideration for new media's capacity for change, that very act of revision can make establishing an efficient methodology difficult. By streamlining the process of updating, media industries create a standard for volatility and impermanence. As new media evolves through this constant churn of revision and innovation, it presents audiences with an object that resists its own observation. To respond to that challenge, I construct a historical context for how these industry changes have taken place, a technological framework for the specific affordances of networked gaming, and a wide range of discourse

analysis to outline the inherent tension between the game industry and its audience as the precedent for digital revisionism takes hold. Within these broader methodological approaches, I employ industry analysis with a focus on both reception studies and innovations for digital business models;³⁴ technological analysis of the console's platform design and hobbyist console modding efforts; textual and interface analysis of specific gaming titles, online message boards, and user reviews; historical analysis of the console's online marketplace and their incorporation of DLC; and a particular focus on the trade press *Game Developer*'s online archive.³⁵ Through these diverse and overlapping methodological approaches, I establish a more comprehensive understanding of how digital revisionism has taken shape in the video game console industry, how the technology both allows for these changes and frames online expansions and update cultures to their players, and how online gaming receptions reveal tensions surrounding the industry's attempts to acculturate audiences toward these digital norms and the audience's own conflicted position toward digital revisionism as well.

Throughout my dissertation, I also highlight how the changing dynamic between the game industry and its audience presents a context in which conflict narratives help to define the contours and inherent stakes of gaming's digital interventions. In a prescient take that precedes many of the strategies I outline, Stephen Kline et al. comment that the video game industry defines its chaotic production model through "a constant attempt to strategize responses to a highly unstable, fluid, crisis-ridden conjunction in which managing markets, workers, consumers, and commodities proceeds by incessant improvisation, and where today's solution

³⁴ Note: It's also worth pointing out that my framing of the console game industry predominately involves triple A development and highlights the forward-facing elements of the industry most visible to audiences (such as press releases, interviews, and official game forums), particularly as this focus helps to establish the contours of the discourse taking shape between the industry and gamers.

³⁵ Note: *Game Developer* is the rebranded name for the long-running game trade press *Gamasutra*.

becomes, overnight, part of tomorrow's problem."³⁶ I believe advances in digital distribution have only exaggerated the industry's improvisational character but that by adopting a more historical lens we can see ways in which normative patterns emerge through the ebb and flow of gaming update cultures. As such, I look at conflicts between the industry and its audience as a means to delineate production and distribution norms, charting a path from their initial rejection to moments of eventual, and at times negotiated or still tenuous, acceptance. I believe this tension of revision can indicate a productive use of overreach as developers experiment with extreme distribution models and then make modest adjustments through updates, normalizing the intense commodification and cultural hegemony of digital gaming's production and distribution in the process. Taking this approach, I suggest inverting the very observation that Kline et al. make by observing that the industry has learned to take today's problem and turn it into tomorrow's solution in a constant loop of tempering user expectations.

To foreground a historical analysis for the console industry, I start by examining how normative patterns of online distribution and audience engagement take shape through the console industry's use of the digital network. Here I borrow from how Lisa Gitelman discusses new media and its initial formation of protocols in which users and producers both come to an understanding about the functionality and use value of a commodity.³⁷ Similarly, I believe studying the ways the industry struggles to implement this technology can offer insights into the underlying economic and ideological imperatives tied to these advances in production and distribution. To this point, Benjamin Mako Hill writes that "errors can reveal distinct and overlapping aspects of the technologies that mediate our lives and the designers of those

³⁶ Kline et al. (2003), 77.

³⁷ Lisa Gitelman, *Always Already New: Media, History, and the Data of Culture* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 2006).

technologies [...] the affordances and constraints of technology that are often invisible to us.”³⁸ (2011, 29). These opening historical frameworks then inform an analysis that studies the video game industry, console technology, and the users themselves while revealing the ways these considerations purposefully intersect.

I expand on this historical approach to my industrial analysis by consulting trade press articles, press releases, developer notes, and interviews from the console industry producers. Specifically, I look at online news and review sites like *Polygon*, *Kotaku*, *IGN*, *Forbes*, *Business Insider*, *Game Informer*, *EuroGamer*, *Venture Beat*, et al. that often carry press materials, advertisements, and discussions on industry trends. I study the trade publication *Game Developer*, which circulates within the industry more directly, early PC gaming trade presses like *PC Gamer* and *Computer Gaming World*, and official websites for specific games to view developer commentary and discourses on a game’s message boards. For the majority of my industry analysis, I consider documentation from the early 1990s to the present day to allow for a wide historical range that covers the PC industry’s precedent for online gaming that took place in the mid-1990s, the early experimentation with console industry’s networked play in the early 2000s, the online console launches of the Xbox 360 and PlayStation 3 in the mid-2000s, and the later incorporation of expansions and update cultures that have evolved up to the present day. However, while the dissertation’s historical scope covers the span of decades to give a full picture of digital gaming’s trends and precedents, I prioritize the console launches of the Xbox 360 and PlayStation 3 as a turning point in the industry’s production and distribution practices.

Highlighting the console’s networked turning point in the mid-2000s, I argue that these hardware launches offer the clearest and most prominent examples of the industry’s efforts to

³⁸ Benjamin Mako Hill, “Revealing Errors,” in *Error: Glitch, Noise and Jam in New Media Cultures*, edited by Mark Nunes (New York: Bloomsbury Academic, 2011), 29.

fully integrate online platforms and digital markets into the console gaming experience.³⁹ Similarly, the Xbox 360 and PlayStation 3 stand at the forefront of the console industry's large-scale, dedicated push to sell users DLC add-ons and develop trends for the console's digital expansions. In order to establish the critical importance of this historical precedent, in Chapter 2 I compile a detailed breakdown of the opening 3 years of developers incorporating DLC into their Xbox 360 and PlayStation 3 releases, focusing on the growing number of titles that include DLC, the specific nature of the DLC (e.g. add on maps, new character skins, larger game expansions), the genres that seemed to favor these add-ons, the release windows for expansions (e.g. if DLC was added at launch or sold several months after a game's release), and the pricing trends of the add-ons. By establishing a clear historical foundation for the console industry's use of digital technology, I then contextualize the growing trends of digital revisionism as part of a larger trajectory for the game industry.

I likewise nuance my examination of the console industry with a thorough investigation of the platforms and games themselves. In some cases, I rely on interface analysis to observe the affordances that digital games and platforms allow both producers and consumers and consider the underlying implications of these designs. As Jeremy Morris writes, "like media more generally, interfaces are hardly neutral conveyors of messages. They are designed with specific goals in mind, with certain affordances and prescriptions."⁴⁰ Similarly, Mel Stanfill argues that

³⁹ Note: While the Nintendo Wii launched in the same year as the PlayStation 3 in the fall of 2006, I focus more directly on Microsoft and Sony's consoles for a few important reasons. Most notably, even though the Wii featured its own online market and had similar networked innovations, the console's limited hard drive space created distinct limitations for how well the Wii could incorporate digital expansions and updating. Not incidentally, the console featured very few titles that sold DLC within the lifespan of the system. The Xbox 360 and PlayStation 3 also shared more overlap in third-party developer releases, due to their higher computational specifications, and so they provide a more unified example of shared developer trends with expansions and updates. Finally, the Nintendo Wii's unique online platform and hardware limitations are already covered well in Steven E. Jones and George K. Thiruvathukal's book on the console. For more, see: Steven E. Jones and George K. Thiruvathukal, *Codename Revolution: The Nintendo Wii Platform* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 2012).

⁴⁰ Jeremy Morris, *Selling Digital Music, Formatting Culture* (Oakland: University of California Press, 2015), 48.

interfaces structure normative behavior “as the social valuation attached to the norm makes compliance with normativity a compelling option.”⁴¹ In specific case studies for Chapter 1 and Chapter 2, I also use an adapted version of the walkthrough method to demonstrate the ways games structure a specific form of engagement as users move through menu screens, game creation modes, and online environments as a step by step process.⁴² Similarly, in Chapter 1 I use a technical analysis of console modding guidelines to help emphasize the black box technological design of online consoles through the precarious examples of hobbyists attempting to jailbreak or homebrew these systems and override their platform designs.

With that said, some of the games I am writing about defy easy textual and interface analysis since the qualities I look to observe have been rewritten by developers through updates. In these cases, the methodological approaches not only reflect the priorities of the chapter’s arguments but also the presence or lack thereof of the game’s online experience. For example, in Chapter 1 I analyze *Little Big Planet 3*’s (2011) level creation system, tutorials, and menu options in part because the game’s online platform still exists—however, I had to choose *Little Big Planet 3* rather than one of the earlier franchise installments because the developer discontinued the other games’ servers, and the analysis would lack a clear understanding of their online functionality. By contrast, when I analyze broken game development in Chapter 3, I focus on a reception study for *Assassin’s Creed Unity* (2014) and center the analysis on Ubisoft’s official online forum. I made this decision not only because it gives insight into how the developer framed expectations for their updates and how audiences responded to buying a game that did not function but *also* because Ubisoft eventually patched the broken version of

⁴¹ Mel Stanfill, “The Interface as Discourse: The Production of Norms Through Web Design,” *New Media & Society* Vol. 17.7 (2015), 1061.

⁴² Ben Light, Jean Burgess, and Stefanie Duguay, “The Walkthrough Method: An Approach to the Study of Apps,” *New Media & Society* (November 11, 2016).

Assassin's Creed Unity out of existence so the reception became the most detailed record of its broken state of play. In this case, the availability of a game's experience would then help to inform how case studies were chosen and what the analysis would ultimately focus on.

Finally, I supplement my industrial and technological research by using online discourse analysis to study contentious game receptions and note communication dynamics between the audience and the console industry. To establish these discourse narratives, I use textual analysis of online message boards and forums, user reviews, social media posts, and discord feeds. In the process, I chart the ways in which audiences either conform to or push back against engrained expectations of digital business models and update cultures within both *industry-sanctioned spaces*, such as with Chapter 3's study on Ubisoft's official forum, and *peripheral online spaces*, such as Chapter 4's study on review bombing practices and user protests on Twitter and Reddit. By studying these distinct online spaces, I likewise outline the established hierarchy between producers and consumers, noting the ways in which both the industry and its audience can influence a game's discourse. As Johnson argues, producers can control a privileged position in online discourse when intervening on official forums, "reasserting their productive dominance, reframing 'normative' fandom within 'proper' spheres of consumption."⁴³ Additionally, Mel Stanfill's interface analysis model can help demonstrate how an official forum's interface affordances encourage some forms of communication over others and help to ameliorate or recontextualize gaming controversies.

As for peripheral online spaces, I use Phillips and Milner's conceptualization of the ambivalent internet to help illustrate the ways in which audiences can still galvanize themselves

⁴³ Derek Johnson, "Fan-tagonism: Factions, Institutions, and Conservative Hegemonies of Fandom," *Fandom: Identities and Communities in a Mediated World*, eds. Jonathan Gray, Cornel Sandvoss, and C. Lee Harrington (New York: New York University Press, 2007), 294.

around critical issues in the industry and the challenges online audiences face with constructing a coherent backlash. With these cases, I am particularly interested in how consumers use review-bombing and refund requests to influence the industry and how unified action against developers and publishers remains a site of intense contestation within the audience itself, involving fan attachment to different triple-A game series and debates over reasonable audience expectations. I also examine how online game sites like *Polygon* and *Kotaku* shape these discussions in sometimes contradictory ways as they attempt to push against industry practices and embrace them at different moments.

Ultimately, I employ these methods as means to detail not just the prevailing practices of digital change in the game industry but also to capture the sense of precarity and transience that accompanies these changes. Despite the challenges of studying media that can be remade indefinitely through contingent updating and expansions, these case studies also present an opportunity to expand on how we conceptualize digital impermanence as a source of historical absence. Notably, the idea of studying absence is already an integral part of constructing media historiography in our field. As Jonathan Sterne writes, “it is the absence of the past, the impossibility of finding direct access to it, that makes possible the writing, reading, and contemplation of history.”⁴⁴ In this case, though, I believe that we should broaden the scope for how we consider ‘absences of the past’ to include not just a reflexive consideration of our own position as researchers but also the way absence creates a critical point of reference for both the industry and its audience. This conceptualization can help researchers think through the cultural importance of engaging with digitally revised media and how the experience of playing through

⁴⁴ Jonathan Sterne, “Rearranging the Files: On Interpretation in Media History,” *The Communication Review* 13, no. 1 (2010): 80.

updated content speaks to a future potential of the text even as producers work to erase media's past.

Chapter Breakdown

In Chapter 1, I begin my dissertation's argument by exploring the technological frameworks, historical precedents, and participatory cultures that inform the console industry's adoption of online connectivity. I argue that when the console industry adopted networked connections, it did so within the context of establishing an *online console black box* that placed distinct limitations on how its audience could participate in co-creative practices and ensured the industry's firm control over the domain of digital interventions on gaming. To set up the historical context of the industry's networked control over online play, I first detail how the console industry experimented with networked affordances in the early 2000s even when the console generation's technology did not easily support online integration.⁴⁵ These efforts culminated with the next generation of console launches, most directly with the Xbox 360 and PlayStation 3, which were not only created from the outset with online functionality in mind but were pointedly designed as black box technology that streamlined firmware updates and curtailed the audience's ability to hack the console's system. Instead, the consoles wed online gaming with a *walled garden* platform interface, digital marketplaces, and proprietary networks.

I highlight the stakes of this historical turning point in the console industry by contrasting these developments with the precedent of PC gaming's online modding culture. Using PC modding communities as a prominent case study, I discuss the political and subversive potential of digital participatory cultures while still observing how media industries can harness this

⁴⁵ Note: Specifically, I highlight how both the PlayStation 2 and GameCube later sold network adapters to allow for very limited online play but did not have the necessary hard disk for updating and expansions. By contrast, the Xbox released with an ethernet port and a hard disk but did not immediately release an online service for the console and would likewise wait for the next console generation to design a more dedicated online platform at launch.

participation as a form of free labor and that the PC industry's reliance on user agreements still presents obstacles for creative modding practices. Even so, I ultimately argue the console industry's use of a black box technological framework sets even greater limitations on the player's creative freedom to intervene as co-producers in online gaming. To emphasize this point, I use two case studies to detail the polar ends of how players can still intervene on the console's digital game and what co-productive practices the console either allows for or actively discourages through its technological design.

In my first case study, I discuss precarious console modding by analyzing the ambitious and unsanctioned player made 'Second Wind' expansion for Nintendo's *Breath of the Wild* (2017). In this case study, I use discourse analysis to study the player-made production of 'Second Wind', highlighting the group's Discord page and 'Second Wind' wiki, to observe both the scale of the mod expansion and the discursive positioning of the community's creative work. From there, I shift to a technological analysis of the 'Second Wind' GitHub installation page for the mod and a homebrew guide for the Nintendo Switch, which highlights both the technological knowledge needed to incorporate console modding and the risks involved with taking the console offline to do so (including the possibility of destroying the console itself or earning a lifelong ban on your Nintendo online account). In my second case study, I contrast this unsanctioned use of player creativity with the emergent trend of console level creator games and analyze the limitations of creating on an official console platform for these productions. To make this case, I highlight the popular franchise title *LittleBigPlanet 3* (2014) and use my adapted version of the walkthrough method to show how the game's opening menu interface, level creation mode, and tutorials help to structure a highly controlled variation on console creativity—not only setting limits on level creation assets and gameplay mechanics but also

incorporating content moderation to ensure the player's creativity does not break copyright agreements and aligns with *LittleBigPlanet*'s family friendly branding. Putting both of these case studies side by side, I then seek to outline a broader perspective on how the console's purposeful use of technology sets clear boundaries for creative practices that players cannot easily defy or work around.

In Chapter 2, I build on my analysis of the console industry's early adoption of networked affordances by focusing on how console producers used their system's platforms to expand on online gaming through DLC add-ons, digital marketplaces, and in-game economies. I argue that this expansion has slowly intensified and transformed the industry's use of digital business models and economic appeals, while also creating a context for the game commodities constant and unrelenting renewal. These evolving approaches to digital production and distribution then co-opt the creative innovations from PC modding communities and recontextualize smaller add-ons within the context of discrete purchases. As with Chapter 1, I draw a comparison to the PC gaming industry's precedent for digital expansions, noting the gradual shift toward prioritizing a digital service model that uses the industry's contingent connection to the Internet to renew audience interest in their gaming titles and align online communal play with these purchased expansions. Similarly, I chart the first three years of the Xbox 360 and PlayStation 3's incorporation of DLC add-ons, not only to outline early developer trends and industry logics for the console's use of their online marketplace and expansions but also to show how the industry began to think of console software as the driving force of industry innovation.

The console industry's efforts to intertwine the digital marketplaces with online gaming features then presents audiences a paradox of conditional expansion, wherein a game's renewal

and perpetual innovation is fundamentally tied to the player's economic investment. These trends consolidate within increasingly predatory digital business models that rely on microtransaction systems, multiple overlapping in-game economies, and loot box mechanics that not only obscures the relationship between the real world money buy-in and the game's virtual currency but also employ gambling mechanics and ties in-game economies to communal spaces to both intensify and transform the ways in which the industry can commodify online play. To demonstrate these predatory market practices, I use the walkthrough method once more on the game *NBA 2K18* (2017) and its MyPlayer and MyNeighborhood play modes to highlight how the developers create a highly commodified online communal space and tie microtransactions to both a purposefully arduous upgrade system to improve player avatars and the means to change the look and expressivity of these avatars well. This in-depth study then reveals the console industry's predominant stance to frame digital expansions as a promise of the game's renewal while reinforcing and transforming the economic barriers that function as a gateway for online play.

In Chapter 3, I elaborate on how the console industry's use of digital change not only involves expansions but also streamlined game updates. Unlike with DLC, updates are often meant to be invisible and corrective but can radically alter the meaning of the text without the audience necessarily appreciating what those changes are or how the text becomes revised. To show the implications of update cultures, I focus on the industry trend of broken games in which developers do not perform adequate quality assurance, rushing games to the market with the knowledge that they can revise them with day one patches and post-release updates. In these examples, the industry creates controversies around games that do not work correctly and pushes forward norms of digital revisionism with claims that they will eventually deliver the game they

promised through updated patches. In the process, developers use their gaming audience as makeshift beta testers by encouraging them to report on bugs and errors and improve the game they purchased. I then relate these industry practices to a perpetual beta model in which companies release free beta versions of software and incorporate user input to improve the product. However, with broken games developers attempt to impose this logic on the text retroactively and within the context of a purchase, creating what I refer to as a *perpetual update culture* in which the developers both negotiate backlash and purposefully recontextualize the audience's frustrations as free labor.

I focus my main case study on Ubisoft's infamously broken release of *Assassin's Creed Unity* (2014), looking both at the game itself and the audience's engagement with it online. To better understand the developer's suggested stance for a perpetual update culture, I use interface analysis on Ubisoft's official forum and a close textual reading of the first 150 posts on the forum following *Assassin's Creed Unity*'s release. Through this sampling of the game's online discourse, I demonstrate how Ubisoft cultivates a specific engagement with the game that favors a stance on a perpetual update culture, particularly by closing contentious threads and officially responding to forum posts that align with a perpetual update culture, and how individual users likewise work to conform to Ubisoft's suggested forum guidelines to post on bugs and errors. Meanwhile, I also emphasize the degree to which users still attempt to protest Ubisoft's broken release and broader business practices within the confines of this official forum. Through this analysis, I then suggest how the norms of digital revisionism create tensions between industry producers and their audiences, even as the industry works to acculturate their players to a new digital normal and use updates as a clear defense against controversy.

In Chapter 4, I use my preceding chapters and case studies as a foundation to consider digital revisionism as a fraught process of negotiation between the industry and its audience. In this final chapter, I explain that digital revisionism not only entails digital changes to a game but also changes to the culture of gaming and that the stakes of digital change can be understood in greater detail when exploring how audiences attempt to assert their control on the industry through galvanized moments of controversy. Unlike with PC modding cultures, the console industry has pushed players toward the periphery of the text and has challenged their direct ownership over online gaming, but players can still actively dispute and subvert industry practices through review bombing and other forms of online protest. Furthermore, I contextualize the means with which players can influence the overall discourse on a game's reception within the larger context of audience and fan studies.

By framing audience studies literature within the central concern of an audience's agency and their negotiated position as media consumers, I underscore how audiences still inform the industry's practices through their engagement with media, how the ambivalence of online discourses presents challenges to the audience's ability to channel controversy toward meaningful change, and finally how the audience's expression of dislike and outrage nevertheless has the power to dispute the industry's engrained practices. With that said, I ultimately argue that the industry can use digital revisionism as a means to overwrite their failures and even test the audience's current threshold for market practices. Each revised controversy then threatens to wear down an audience's resistance and replace sentiments of outrage with futility.

To outline how the longer view of digital revisionism can reveal this strained dynamic between audience outrage and industry control, I examine the controversial release of *Star Wars*

Battlefront II (2017) as my final case study. In this game, Electronic Arts used an open beta to promote the game and unveil a microtransaction system that tied purchased loot box add-ons with gameplay upgrades, creating the impression that online players could pay to gain a competitive advantage. Audiences responded to these suggested game mechanics by review bombing the game and protesting it online during a particularly contentious Reddit thread hosted by the game's developers as part of their marketing campaign. I study the online discourse of the game, highlighting user reviews, the above-mentioned Reddit message board thread, and the surrounding critical discourse published by a multitude of online news sources like *Kotaku*, *Forbes*, and *Polygon*—the latter of which simultaneously worked to criticize EA's use of loot box mechanics but also advertised the game's revision by publishing subsequent articles on *Battlefront II*'s updated content. In the process of my analysis, I demonstrate how controversy can force the industry's hand while still observing how the game developers ultimately used this backlash to finetune their game's economic appeals as they eventually reintegrated loot box mechanics with more palatable cosmetic skin upgrades that would not upset the balance of the game's online matchmaking.

Finally, I conclude my dissertation with parting thoughts on how both digital games and their receptions evolve and the ways in which we can continue to explore ideas of digital revisionism and the future of gaming. Within this discussion, I outline additional contemporary cases of digital revisionism and outline how digital change can still work to either the gaming industry or its audience's benefit—even if the balance of networked control often skews toward the industry. Additionally, I note the tension involved with audiences embracing these changes as a means for developers to retroactively fulfill the broken promises of their games and caution that as the industry works to standardize these revisions, they also frame a game's appeal not so

much in its present use but in the speculative future potential of a later version or expansion. The tension inherent to digital revisionism would then involve a need to balance the desire for future change with the pressing demands of a present moment in gaming, however fleeting that moment may be.

Gaming the System: Digital Revisionism in the Aggregate

In this introduction, I have not only outlined the significance of digital revisionism for the video game console industry but have also suggested that these industry trends extend far beyond the domain of game studies. I believe the idea of revision is an inherent feature of new media studies in part because digital technology already acts to renew and reinvigorate our cultural industries. As media producers increasingly rely on online distribution, platform interfaces, tiered subscription and service models, streamlined updates and expansions, and fleeting windows of access for media on online servers, the discussion of new media's persistent evocation of the *new* stands in stark contrast to what these revisions efface and how the open-ended potential of digital change can be harnessed by media industries. As Wendy Chun writes, "new media, if they are new, are new as in renovated, once again, but on steroids, for they are constantly asking/needing to be refreshed. They are new to the extent that they are updated."⁴⁶ The persistent need for new media's renovation reinforces the cultural industry's preoccupation with perpetual innovation, as each update can align digital texts with a renewed commodified appeal. However, these changes to media texts do not just alter the way digital commodities can be sold but also influence the cultures of media consumption.

In the following chapters, I outline how the console game industry's capacity for revision creates new forms of engagement between industry producers and their audiences and has far-

⁴⁶ Wendy Hui Kyong Chun, *Updating to Remain the Same: Habitual New Media* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 2016), 2.

reaching consequences for how we think about the ways we still ‘own’ our media and the ways we can influence its place in our culture. To demonstrate the importance of digital revisionism, I use video game studies as a bellwether for the potential practices of our larger cultural industries, in part because games offer such a clear connection between technological design and the experience of media itself. By isolating the console industry’s incorporation of networked affordances, I consider not only the way updates and expansions help to indefinitely commodify digital gaming and offer the industry a chance to revise their own failures, but also suggest larger tensions between media industries and their audiences that extend beyond any individual text or case study. In a broader view of digital change in new media, we can consider how industry producers use digital distribution and online discussions to construct a litmus test for their development practices.

The controversies surrounding predatory in-game economy mechanics, empty marketing campaigns, and otherwise negative receptions of games then highlight the ways in which failure becomes negotiable as game producers work to address audience concerns through updates and patches. However, at the core of this prolonged negotiation lies an instinct toward acculturation in which media producers can continually suggest norms for digital media and what business practices audiences will currently accept, while constantly working to push these informal thresholds with future releases. In other words, the industry quite literally games the system of networked control and in order for audiences to assert our will and influence on digital change, we must first understand that a longer view is needed beyond the focus of any one controversial release.

Chapter 1: Creating the Online Console Black Box

In late 2019, a group of game modders created a discord called ‘Second Wind’ that aimed to provide players a fan-made expansion on the Nintendo Switch game *The Legend of Zelda: Breath of the Wild* (2017).¹ These unofficial development efforts would add new missions, areas, enemies, and equipment to the game, extending its shelf life beyond Nintendo’s own official DLC (Downloadable Content) for the title. However, while the discord presented the expansion as labor of love that audiences could easily and freely acquire, any further investigation into how players could practically integrate those modifications onto their personal consoles would reveal a precarious and technically complex set of processes—including the need to *jailbreak* or *homebrew* their consoles to circumvent the Switch’s use of online platform affordances that curtailed player interventions. Looking through the specific homebrew instructions linked to the ‘Second Wind’ modification for the Switch, players would then read warnings about Nintendo banning online player accounts, the need to cut off the console’s use of *telemetry* that sends real time feedback on gameplay to Nintendo’s developers, the possibility that players could *brick* or irrevocably damage their consoles by making these changes, and the existence of other outdated or faulty homebrew code setups that would likewise make their game system unusable.² In other words, the ability for a player to use these modifications on the current generation of online consoles involved a high degree of technological mastery, a risk of ruining a console if players failed to follow these instructions properly or use the most up-to-date coding, and a willingness to take both the game and the gaming console ‘offline’ for the foreseeable future.

¹ “Second Wind Hub,” *Discord*, accessed July 3, 2022, <https://discord.com/channels/600679859257081884/640184036148641807>

² noahc3, “The Ultimate Noob Guide for Hacking Your Switch,” *Homebrew Guide*, accessed July 3, 2022, <https://switch.homebrew.guide/gettingstarted/beforestarting.html>

The mere fact that communities have persisted in trying to modify online gaming consoles speaks to the persistent desire for gamers to co-create and intervene in gaming culture. By looking at other popular modifications for *Breath of the Wild*, we can see that these efforts go beyond the fan impulse to extend the life of a game and to contribute to the game's lore. For example, one group of modders hunted through the game's code to find incomplete 3D character models for Princess Zelda, finished those character models, and then gender swapped the main character to allow Princess Zelda take part in the game's action—subverting the typical fairy tale trope of the hero Link saving the princes from captivity.³ In another example, a group of international players created a modification that would translate the game into Arabic since *Breath of the Wild* lacked an official translation for the language despite high sales in a number of Middle Eastern countries.⁴ In both cases, *Kotaku* reported on the existence of these modifications so players could appreciate, at a distance, the lengths to which an audience could go to make corrections on modern games and make them their own. However, if players wanted to share in these works, they would have to grapple with the fact that online gaming consoles would not make the journey easy or even possible for them.

In my opening chapter, I propose to look at the history of online gaming consoles and highlight the ways in which the console industry has changed the culture around player participation compared to their PC gaming counterparts. I argue that the console industry's incorporation of online proprietary networks, digital marketplaces, and streamlined updates presaged a historical turn in the game industry in which producers could better set the terms of online community formations and player co-production practices, while co-opting PC modding

³ Luke Plunkett, "It's 2021, And *Breath of the Wild* is Finally Playable in Arabic," *Kotaku*, October 11, 2021, <https://kotaku.com/its-2021-and-breath-of-the-wild-is-finally-playable-in-1847842352>.

⁴ Heather Alexandra, "Ambitious Mod Reworks *Breath of the Wild* to Make Zelda the Hero," *Kotaku*, May 7, 2018, <https://kotaku.com/ambitious-mod-reworks-breath-of-the-wild-to-make-zelda-1825834396>.

innovations in the form of producer-controlled and marketed digital add-ons. I call this historical turn the creation of the *online console black box*, borrowing from platform studies literature that has analyzed black box technological frameworks and proprietary networks that prevent users from making changes to a platform or from having direct access to digital files. In gaming history, home video game consoles had always adopted closed ecosystems, but they initially lacked online affordances, while online gaming developed separately on personal computers that connected to the Internet. However, as technology advanced the video game console market began experimenting with online features midway through the generation for Sony's PlayStation 2 (2000), Nintendo's GameCube (2001), and Microsoft's Xbox (2001). At this point in history, online features for these consoles were incomplete and experimental, leaving audiences to wait until the next generation of home gaming systems to get a better glimpse of how the future of online console gaming would take shape. These technological advances would then culminate most directly in the console designs for Microsoft's Xbox 360 (2005) and Sony's PlayStation 3 (2006), which were made from the outset to integrate online markets and gameplay into their respective launches. In the process of creating this networked turn in the console market, industry producers could then differentiate their systems from PCs, which were made with more open designs that led to a robust modding culture online. By contrast, the new gaming consoles worked to both streamline online affordances and curtail audience interventions on the games themselves, ushering in changes to digital gaming itself in the process.

In this chapter, I first outline the historical origins of the game console industry's incorporation of online marketplaces and proprietary networks, focusing attention not just toward the changes in the technology but also the ways in which that online engagement can be streamlined and tightly controlled. From there, I place that history within the context of academic

literature on platform studies and game studies, arguing that these industry changes align with broader shifts in the cultural industries and favor platform governance and black box technological designs. To set up a contrast to that controlled design, I then look closely at the modding cultures that emerged in PC gaming, highlighting the political potential and personal value tied to this form of participation, while still acknowledging the ways in which PC game producers nevertheless profit from this creativity and challenge its subversive potential through user agreement forms and copyright claims rather than closing off player participation altogether.

Finally, I examine two case studies that explore console creative practices from different perspectives. First, I outline the precarious work of console game modding in more depth, using the *Breath of the Wild* ‘Second Wind’ mod as an example of a current, large-scale hobbyist community working to build their own expansion for Nintendo’s popular console-only title. To make my case, I open this study with discourse analysis on the modding group’s communications to demonstrate how that community aligns their work within broader modding discourses and practices. I then follow that discussion with a technological overview of the ‘Second Wind’ installation guide and the related Nintendo Switch homebrewing walkthrough to emphasize the warnings and complex technological knowledge involved with making these changes. In the process, this case study will highlight a constant and evolving tension between player interventions on the console’s online gaming space and the industry’s own iterative control. By contrast, the second case study explores the popular genre of console level creation games with analysis on *LittleBigPlanet 3* (2014). In this last section, I use the walkthrough method and textual analysis to outline the limitations of user creativity, compared to the broader application of co-creation practices in PC modding. I likewise consider the implications for the profit model driving these games, which effectively base their appeal on selling player creativity

through a highly circumscribed means of individual expression, and the consequences involved with co-creation being published on industry-owned servers that can cease to exist once the game community fails to drive significant profit and investment. In both case studies, I hope to demonstrate that there remain ways in which players can still challenge the boundaries suggested by online consoles and platforms, but that these participatory cultures are still defined and influenced by those same boundaries.

By studying these issues involving technological affordances and platform design, I look to set up my broader study on the stakes of digital change in new media. While the game industry was not the first to incorporate digital distribution norms or to shift their production models away from physical media, they remain at the forefront of innovating media as a service model—encouraging constant engagement and renewed consumption. Meanwhile, this shift in production and distribution models prompts a series of questions on how digital producers work to codify these norms, establishing technological change as a means to accelerate and extend audience consumption patterns, and the industry's ability to indefinitely revise and renew digital goods. In such cases, how do these technological shifts change online cultures and the norms of player participation? Additionally, how do the stakes of platform politics and the heightened industry control over digital media help us understand the ways in which online communities can still engage with media, underlining the tensions between emergent play practices and the industry's ability to harness and profit from player-based user production? My chapter will address these considerations by emphasizing the ways in which the gaming console has evolved to allow for a more circumscribed form of player participation.

Ultimately, this chapter sets the foundation for a broader consideration about media's digital turn and the ways in which cultural industries use digital affordances to cultivate a more

intense and persistent form of commodification, while also using the platform's ability to change with new updates to reinforce market logics and revise any controversies that arise through these shifting norms in the broader sphere of online culture. Focusing on console gaming not only reveals larger industry preoccupations surrounding new media but also provides a rare glimpse into digital experimentation and acculturation, since console producers were in a unique position to both learn from PC online gaming norms while diverging from them to create a more circumscribed context surrounding digital play and gaming cultures. Meanwhile, the digital affordances of the game industry speak to a larger concern in which audiences find themselves moving further and further away from direct ownership over their media and are at the mercy of online live service platforms that can change without warning and games that can disappear from online servers once producers deem their media not profitable enough to continue supporting. In the process of making these changes to digital gaming, this larger study likewise reveals a struggle in which console producers still must contend with conflicting audience expectations for online gaming and attempt to codify digital production and distribution practices that benefit the industry while attenuating the player's desire for a brighter future in gaming.

Designing The Online Game Console

In the early 2000s, console game development relied almost exclusively on either solo player campaigns or multiplayer experiences that were designed for the home with split screen features or LAN (local area network) connections to multiple screens in a single household. In large part, these development trends reflected the technological limitations of the console generations and stood in stark contrast to the burgeoning development of profitable online games in the PC industry—most noticeably with a growing trend of MMORPGs that not only charged monthly subscription fees but could feature complex in-game economies that slowly encouraged

renewed investment for players looking to acquire new cosmetic skins or gain advantages in gameplay with high-grade equipment and crafting materials. In Chapter 2, I study the historical development of online digital games on the console generation from the developer's perspective and note how digital market innovations took place in the form of DLC add-ons and expansions, loot box gambling mechanics, and microtransaction systems. However, before I outline how the console industry's digital marketplace and in-game economies evolved once consoles *could* sustain an integrated online network, it's worth first examining the technological turn that made that industry transition possible, setting the terms for how console games could expand and integrate game economies through the console's broader digital marketplace.

In this dissertation, the historical scope of my study principally concerns the console generation launches for the Xbox 360 and PlayStation 3, due to how those consoles represented a large-scale paradigm shift where online gaming slowly became a standard for industry development and publishing. Nevertheless, it's worth detailing that these changes were first experimented with on the prior generation of console systems launched at the outset of the century, well before console game developers committed to a consistent, dedicated approach for *using* online market affordances. This delay between the possibilities afforded by hardware technology and the integration of online-based software seems largely due to the ad hoc nature in which the PlayStation 2, Xbox, and GameCube all launched on the market without clear and upfront integration of online features. Most notably, both the PlayStation 2 and GameCube were released on the market without functional online connectivity. Sony and Nintendo later released separate network adapters for their consoles at an additional purchase (40 USD for the PlayStation 2, 35 USD for the GameCube), which then enabled support for online play. However, the consoles still lacked a hard disk that would have allowed developers to patch and

update these titles, severely limiting the developers' ability to support online play even if players went through the trouble to purchase these adapters.⁵ Ultimately, industry producers had a clear interest in developing the technology for online play but had yet to consolidate around a consistent approach to their hardware across the console generation.

A closer look at online distribution experiments with Sony's PlayStation 2 reveal both the growing interest in online gaming and its technological limitations on consoles. For instance, Sony worked as a publisher for *SOCOM: U.S. Navy SEALs* (2002), one of the console's sole 'broadband-only' games. *SOCOM* later set a record for console online matchmaking with a peak of between 11,000 to 14,500 online players using the game's server at the same time,⁶ indicating that there was audience interest for online console gameplay. Still, it's worth mentioning that popular PC online games at the time would have dwarfed these numbers and that, unlike with PC gaming, *SOCOM* had virtually no online competition for a console that had already sold over 11 million units in North America alone by the end of 2002.⁷ Similarly, there were experiments with DLC expansions on PlayStation 2 but the hardware limitations of the console once again presented issues with adopting a full-scale implementation of an online distribution model. In fact, Sony had to release a standalone hard drive at the cost of 99 USD in part to accommodate planned expansions for popular releases *SOCOM II* (2003) and *Syphon Filter: The Omega Strain* (2004).⁸ In both cases, these were games that Sony worked to publish and then attempted to sell hardware add-ons just to allow the company to profit off of their expansions.

⁵ Steve Ganem, "Developing Online Console Games," *Game Developer*, March 28, 2003, <https://www.gamedeveloper.com/design/developing-online-console-games>.

⁶ David Jenkins, "*SOCOM II* Sets Online Record," *Game Developer*, November 7, 2003, <https://www.gamedeveloper.com/pc/-i-socom-ii-i-sets-online-record>.

⁷ *Game Developer* Staff, "PS2 Network Adapter Ships in North America," *Game Developer*, August 27, 2002, <https://www.gamedeveloper.com/pc/ps2-network-adapter-ships-in-north-america>.

⁸ David Jenkins, "Sony Announces Release Date for Hard Drive," *Game Developer*, September 17, 2003, <https://www.gamedeveloper.com/pc/sony-announces-release-date-for-hard-drive>.

In contrast, Microsoft designed the Xbox console to allow for an online connection through the onboard integration of both an ethernet port and a dedicated hard disk. In press releases for the console's launch, several Microsoft executives touted both the Xbox's processing power and the "readiness" of the game's online functionality. Xbox Platform General Manager J Allard went a step further by highlighting the console's incorporation of a hard drive and suggested the potential for online networking to change how developers make console games:

By incorporating the hard drive into the console, Xbox redefines the gaming medium for designers. Xbox games will remember the player's impact on the world around them, allow for the creation of vast worlds, and allow the gamer to customize their experience through the use of soundtracks. When the Xbox Online Experience goes live, the hard disk will enable scenarios like up-to-date sports statistics, 'mission-of-the-week' style gameplay, and new genres of gaming content.⁹

It remains unclear what kind of 'new genres' Allard imagines here, but the speculative nature of the quote highlights an even larger disconnect between the reality of game development and the tantalizing promise of an online console—namely, the Xbox was released with the technical ability to go online but without a system in place to take advantage of that technology. Instead, Microsoft integrated their online market service 'Xbox Live' in 2002, nearly two years after the launch of the console system itself.¹⁰ This late incorporation of the console network failed to capitalize on the multiplayer sensation of *Halo: Combat Evolved* (2001), instead waiting for the game's sequel *Halo 2* (2004) to incorporate online matchmaking play near the end of the Xbox console's life cycle. Furthermore, the small number of online games for the Xbox were

⁹ J Allard, quoted in Microsoft News, "Inform Santa: Xbox Has Arrived," *Microsoft*, November 13, 2001, <https://news.microsoft.com/2001/11/13/inform-santa-xbox-has-arrived/>.

¹⁰ Ganem, 2003.

predominately console exclusives, since game developers otherwise had to plan for cross-platform compatibility and there was little incentive to develop multiple versions of a game depending on whether the title could make use of a console's online market or not.

In this early iteration of the console wars, hardware developers all seemed to acknowledge that online gaming was the future but could only *experiment* with network affordances without a more dedicated and uniformly applied console design that prioritized this shift in gaming. That paradigm shift would then occur in the console launches in 2005 and 2006, marking a seismic moment in the industry when console competitors designed their hardware to enter the market with a dedicated proprietary network and online gaming market. When discussing the respective launches of the Xbox 360 and PlayStation 3, an article in *EuroGamer* detailed Sony's efforts to catch up to Microsoft's console by comparing the capacity between the PlayStation 2 and PlayStation 3 to effectively integrate an online platform:

On the Xbox or Xbox 360, new services are added with occasional software patches that are issued over Xbox Live; the PS2 couldn't do that, so you actually had to boot into a piece of software to do anything related to online functions. [...] [The PlayStation 3] however, has a fully upgradeable operating system, which is capable of downloading patches over the network and applying them to itself. [...] The other big difference on PS3 is that the device has a hard drive—even in its lower-spec configuration. This means that unlike the PS2, which relied on small, expensive memory cards that could easily be moved from machine to machine or even lost entirely, the console has the ability to store its configuration properly and reliably—not to mention being able to download and store

loads of content. You couldn't have done that on PS2, which crippled the system from an online point of view.¹¹

This description outlines the effective changes that would ultimately revolutionize the new console generation's online technological upgrades: namely, consoles now allowed seamless, automatic downloads for patches and updates—either for software titles or the console's operating system itself—and featured improved storage capacity to accommodate these updates and the sale of digital add-ons and expansions.

As the respective Xbox 360 and PlayStation 3 console launches opened the door for independent developers to design online play for cross-platform releases, the industry at large began to experiment with incorporating digital add-ons as prolonged release strategies for gaming (see Chapter 2). However, these industry advances relied not just on online connectivity itself but also the console's closed, 'black box' design to become the dominant purveyor of online expansions, which stood in sharp relief to the growing culture of fan participation and modding communities in the PC industry's own online gaming. As consoles gained the ability to integrate a proprietary network and update their own firmware, the industry used the console's online marketplace as a platform intermediary that could specify a highly circumscribed form of player engagement—most predominantly, to buy into a particular game's renewal or to purchase and download online games through the console's store. Meanwhile, the increasing reliance on online updating and patching both games and the console's firmware had the added effect of preventing savvy audiences from pirating software titles, particularly if that game required additional updating or online play, or streamlining distribution for shared modified code changes

¹¹ Rob Fahey, "PS3 Online: How It Works," *EuroGamer*, October 13, 2006, https://www.eurogamer.net/articles/a_ps3online_131006.

for games. This incorporation of the console's platform could then redirect a game's renewal solely under the auspices of industry producers.

Xbox or Black Box? | Contextualizing the Console's Online Platform

The game industry's use of online platforms notably occurs within a broader 'digital turn' across media and social spaces as digital intermediaries became increasingly integrated and essential to modern daily life. Martin Dodge and Rob Kitchin argue that a social reliance on digital technology has created new spatial formations in which "coded objects, infrastructures, processes and assemblages mediate, supplement, augment, monitor, regulate, facilitate, and ultimately produce collective life."¹² Other prominent new media scholarship elaborates on that production of 'collective life' to note how evolving digital cultures impact social communication and connection,¹³ media labor and production practices,¹⁴ audience participation,¹⁵ and even the construction of social and cultural memory.¹⁶ Within these studies, some scholars have highlighted new possibilities allowed by digital technology—such as the growing scale of connection afforded by online networks and the potential to open new discursive and productive spaces for audiences—while others have pointed to the ways in which media producers can use the opaque characteristics of digital technology as a means to surveil, profit from user data, or harness and even exploit user production. These larger discussions around the role of digital technology in modern society must also contend with how users interact with that technology and how forward-facing interface designs and technological affordances can help to foster or

¹² Martin Dodge and Rob Kitchin, *Code/Space: Software and Everyday Life* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 2011), 9.

¹³ Nancy K Baym, *Personal Connections in the Digital Age* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2010). José van Dijck, *The Culture of Connectivity: A Critical History of Social Media* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013).

¹⁴ Mark Deuze, *Media Work* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2007), Lev Manovich, *The Language of New Media* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 2001).

¹⁵ Henry Jenkins, *Convergence Culture: Where Old and New Media Collide* (New York: New York University Press, 2006), Henry Jenkins, Sam Ford, and Joshua Green, *Spreadable Media: Creating Value and Meaning in Networked Culture* (New York: New York University Press, 2013).

¹⁶ Ed. Andrew Hoskins, *Digital Memory Studies: Media Pasts in Transition* (New York: Routledge, 2018).

thwart these burgeoning digital cultures of engagement. In this case, the utility and visibility of an online platform then demonstrates the tensions between the potential for digital freedoms and limitations.

When discussing digital platforms, it's worth pointing out that the term can be broadly used to describe a multitude of new media and services but involves digital mediation and interfacing as core characteristics. This process of mediation frequently involves multiple layers of interaction as a platform can connect users to other users, users to advertisers, or users to industry producers. These potential intersections remain relevant whether one uses the term to describe social media industries like Facebook and Twitter, video hosting and streaming sites like YouTube and Twitch, online marketplaces like Steam and iTunes, or even the online hosting of individual game titles like the MMORPGs *World of Warcraft* (2004) and *Final Fantasy XIV* (2010). As Tarleton Gillespie argues, the contemporary use of the term platform takes semantic cues from computation, architecture, figurative language, and politics to describe the growing role and importance of online content intermediaries, and can simultaneously describe the technological design of an online platform while suggesting the broader connotations of a "raised platform" from which online users can be seen or heard.¹⁷ He goes on to complicate this reading by observing a tension between the suggested neutrality of a platform and the discursive power involved with digital mediation, writing:

Despite the promises made, 'platforms' are more like traditional media than they care to admit. As they seek sustainable business models, as they run up against traditional regulations and spark discussions of new ones, and as they become large and visible enough to draw the attention not just of their users but of the public at large, the pressures

¹⁷ Tarleton Gillespie, "The 'Politics' of Platforms," *New Media & Society* 12, no. 3 (2010).

mount to strike a different balance between safe and controversial, between socially and financially valuable, between niche and wide appeal.”¹⁸

This account on platform politics then suggests a duality in which the egalitarian potential of online platforms contends with the affordances of a platform’s interface, the business imperatives driving a particular platform, and the ways in which a platform works to codify norms of online connection. In the case of online gaming consoles, the use of the platform would then constitute a more closed-ended circuit that leans on the structuring principles of a digital marketplace—compared to the more obscured, data and advertisement driven business models of social media platforms—but still relies on the connections made between audiences online to drive the system’s value.

Applying this networked platform logic to game system design, we can then consider the console’s full-scale adoption of online connectivity as a moment in which the industry creates an *online console black box*, using its hardware affordances and platform design as means to cultivate a purposefully closed-off use of the Internet where user engagement is framed through the system’s platform and its digital marketplace. When the console generation launched its dedicated online servers for the Xbox 360 and PlayStation 3, the systems suggested a rhetorical line between online gaming and the online store. For example, the Xbox 360’s broader online service was called ‘Xbox Live’ and the marketplace was called ‘Xbox Live Arcade’, while the PlayStation 3’s online service was called the ‘PlayStation Network’ and the marketplace was the ‘PlayStation Store’.¹⁹ Functionally, however, these two services were purposefully intertwined as

¹⁸ Tarleton (2010): 359.

¹⁹ Note: In the case of the Xbox 360, Microsoft further divided its Xbox Live service into free and premium tiers—titled Xbox Live Silver and Xbox Live Gold, respectively. In these cases, Xbox Live Silver allowed players to access the online marketplace, chat with players, and establish an online profile. However, players were required to pay a monthly subscription cost to access online play with XBox Live Gold.

online play could be tied to in-game purchases that linked players to the console's marketplace, while game purchasing, downloading, updating, and online play all ran on the same proprietary network for the consoles. In other words, the console's online platform design allowed for meaningful connections between play and commerce from its inception, purposefully blurring distinction between the two spaces and forms of player engagement. This shift in design also suggested a broader flexibility in how media industries could use digital markets. Business studies scholars have often referred to such networked industries as using "two-sided markets", wherein platform intermediaries work to both streamline and diversify supply chain distribution.²⁰ Similarly, these scholars highlight how media industries use online connectivity to drive market competition and incentivize user buy-in, as producers take advantage of a platform's built-in audience and the platform's "network effects", which refers to when "the value of a product or service to a consumer is contingent on the number of other people using it."²¹ Within these parameters, online consoles gain additional value by capitalizing on the social characteristics of both platforms and games themselves, particularly when that value is driven by the number of players using and buying into a particular service. In some cases, invoking 'network effects' could be as simple as creating online game modes that benefit from a high volume of participating users—for instance, if a player is participating in a 'battle royale' genre game like *Player Unknown Battlegrounds* or *Apex Legends*, which features a large map with up to a hundred players per individual match, the scale of online play helps to drive the title's perceived value. However, in more subtle cases the game may generate value from social play by

²⁰ Jean-Charles Rochet and Jean Tirole, "Platform Competitions in Two-Sided Markets," *Journal of the European Economic Association* 1, no. 4 (2003); Rainer Alt and Hans-Dieter Zimmerman, "Electronic Markets on Platform Competition," *Electronic Markets* 29 (2019); Jørgen Veisdal, "The Dynamics of Entry for Digital Platforms in Two-Sided Markets: A Multi-Case Study," *Electronic Markets* 30 (2020).

²¹ David P. McIntyre and Mohan Subramaniam, "Strategy in Network Industries: A Review and Research Agenda," *Journal of Management* 35, no.6 (2009): 1494.

selling add-ons that create competitive advantages or cosmetic skins for players avatars that allow players the means to reinforce or even reinvent their own identities and personalities in these online, communal spaces.²² Game producers will then rely on the social characteristics of platforms to help forge these connections and sustain buy-in for its particular brand of networked play.

The distinction and subsequent slippage between marketplace and online gaming spaces can likewise be considered as a product of the console's computational design. In this case, we can consider more material, technologically driven approaches to platform studies and game studies, which suggests the ways in which the limitations and affordances of digital technology help to shape media cultures. In Ian Bogost and Nick Montfort's conception of platform studies, the authors argue that studying the technologies behind new media can demonstrate "how social, economic, cultural, and other factors led platform designers to put together systems in particular ways" and "that not only the user's experience, but also interface, form and function, code, and platform, are fully embedded in culture."²³ By purposefully drawing connections between technological design and cultures of use, we can then better illustrate why the game industry's approach to console design could have a significant impact on both norms of online play and consumption.

Amidst the experimentation of online connectivity in earlier console generations and the more dedicated push to incorporate online play and distribution in the launch of the Xbox 360 and PlayStation 3, the consoles worked to incorporate network affordances while still

²² T.L. Taylor "Living Digitally: Embodiment in Digital Worlds" in *The Social Life of Avatars: Presence and Interaction in Shared Virtual Environments*, edited by Ralph Schroeder (London: Springer-Verlag London Ltd., 2002); Adrienne Shaw, *Gaming at the Edge: Sexuality and Gender at the Margins of Gaming Culture* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2014).

²³ Ian Bogost and Nick Montfort, "Platform Studies: Frequently Asked Questions," *Plenaries: After Media – Embodiment and Context* (2009), <https://escholarship.org/uc/item/01r0k9br>.

maintaining a high degree of control over the player's means of online engagement. Steven Jones and George Thiruvathukal aptly highlight how the console system designs highlight this broader industry dynamic, writing that:

An active, commercially viable video game console system in a competitive environment is not designed to be an open platform. Quite the contrary: it's the very definition of a proprietary platform, a dedicated entertainment system [...] designed to offer a controlled, consistent experience, as opposed to a traditional PC.²⁴

Meanwhile, Zittrain argues that the historical arc of platform design leads away from the generative era of personal computers, where users had far more flexibility to run and create programs on the platform, to a standard of “sterile *appliances* tethered to a network of control.”²⁵ He also writes that game consoles feature prominently in this shift and that “Microsoft's Xbox 360 video game console is a powerful computer, but, unlike Microsoft's Windows operating system for PCs, it does not allow just anyone to write software that can run on it.”²⁶ By limiting the degree of user control over these video game systems and making use of the console's platform as a means to cultivate specific forms of online play, the new console era can then work within a *black box* design meant to curtail any audience interventions on the technological back end of these computational systems.

The designation of a black box system can be used to describe the degree to which the full scope of a computational system is made opaque to end-users. In these technological frameworks, users can see their own input into the system and the output based on that input but

²⁴ Steven E. Jones and George K. Thiruvathukal, *Codename Revolution: The Nintendo Wii Platform* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 2012), 126.

²⁵ Jonathan Zittrain, *The Future of the Internet: And How to Stop It* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2008), 3.

²⁶ *Ibid.*

cannot necessarily see the computational steps taken in between those two points.²⁷ For example, users might input a particular term or phrase on Google's search engine and see the results of that search, but they are not privy to the complex algorithm that helps to dictate the engine's output. Similarly, mobile applications like the Tinder dating app will use an API (Application Programming Interface) to structure the input of a user's 'swipes' but would then mask the app's complicated system that structures the potential visibility of the user's profile that would allow for matches. In some ways, this lack of visibility may seem like an intuitive design choice to avoid inundating users with complicated technological details and to protect proprietary information, such as the specific coding for algorithms that provide companies a competitive advantage on the market. However, a lack of technological transparency not only obscures the underlying logics that drive these computational designs but also undercuts the potential for the kind of amateur co-productions and modding practices that flourished in the PC gaming industry.²⁸ In this case, the comparison between gaming consoles and traditional PCs and the larger push toward platform control has important implications, as the console's online black box design not only speaks to the visibility of computational processes but also the growing difficulty for users to intervene in media technology and share those interventions with other players.

When discussing issues of platform governance, we can consider the intentional design behind a platform, whether the company's business model is open and transparent, whether

²⁷ Note: there is also a wide body of social theory work on our relationship with technology and black boxes. For more, see: Trevor J. Pinch, "Opening Black Boxes: Science, Technology, and Society," *Social Studies of Science* 22, no. 3 (1992), Bruno Latour, *Pandora's Hope: Essays on the Reality of Science Studies* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1999), Taina Bucher, "Neither Black Nor Box: Ways of Knowing Algorithms," in *Innovative Methods in Media and Communication Research*, edited by Sebastian Kubitschko and Anne Kaun (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2016).

²⁸ Note: for a parallel study of this form of technology in the music industry, see: Maria Eriksson, Rasmus Fleisher, Anna Johansson, Pelle Snickars, and Patrick Vonderau, *Spotify Teardown: Inside the Black Box of Streaming Music* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 2019).

platforms are working on principles of ‘free labor’, and whether users have the ability to opt into or out of particular platform uses—such as with privacy and data-mining concerns with social media. However, in the case of the video game console industry, it’s equally important to consider the lost potential for more open-ended systems and player creation. Studying the online console’s design in contrast to PC gaming norms then highlights broader shifts for how the incorporation of platforms change the surrounding culture around play and consumption, suggesting new norms of use and user creativity. Poell et al. refer to such shifts as a process of *platformisation*, which “leads to the (re-)organization of cultural practices around platforms, while these practices simultaneously shape a platform’s institutional dimensions.”²⁹ In the video game industry, online console designs would then reorganize the cultural practices in gaming not just with how the platform may allow for online play and participation, but also how the range for that participation and the potential for audience intervention changes when adopting a more closed-ended, black box design. As a result, the ‘raised platform’ of the Xbox Live and PlayStation Network services would constitute more of a walled-off bully pulpit largely privileging participation from the industry producers themselves.

Player Participation and the Precedent of Modding

While front-facing platforms and walled garden approaches to hosting and distributing online content have increasingly become the norm in media industries, the incorporation of online connectivity in the mid-2000 console generation stands in stark contrast to the PC industry’s own established precedent for online play. As I discuss in more detail in Chapter 2, I believe the console industry learned from and incorporated specific innovations and norms in the

²⁹ Thomas Poell, David Nieborg, José van Dijck “Platformisation,” *Internet Policy Review: Journal of Internet Regulation* 8, no. 4 (2019): 6

PC game industry's use of online distribution, particularly as they looked to prolong the life of gaming titles through expansions and add-ons. The console industry's use of DLC can also be understood as a co-option of distribution norms popularized through the PC industry's amateur modding communities, wherein the console industry developed similar, small-scale add-ons such as new equipment or cosmetic skins and then commoditized these add-ons through an evolving approach to microtransactions and in-game economy design models. However, while this co-option and industrialization of modding practices remains a crucial consideration for how emergent digital economies can influence and even rewrite the culture of online gaming, the shift away from more open-ended user production also presents a challenge to audience agency and the possible range of participation, as the potential for modding to reinforce new meanings and disrupt industry norms and values can be thwarted by this loss of control over the text itself.

To begin with, modding describes the process in which players with a sufficient technological background 'modify' a game through direct interventions in the game's code. As mentioned at the start of this chapter, these additions could be as simple as incorporating new character skins, adding new equipment or enemies to the base game, or even integrating subtitles for unofficial translations. Beyond visual modifications, game modders can likewise rewrite the game's overall mechanics and design such as "changing how gameplay unfolds—who wins, who loses, and what the repercussions of various gamic acts are" or changing the game's "software technology, changing character behavior, game physics, lighting techniques, and so on."³⁰ In ambitious cases, game modders can also take a game's assets (i.e. the visual elements that make up a game) and even the broader software design and use that to create an entirely new game as a

³⁰ A. R. Galloway, *Gaming: Essays on Algorithmic Culture* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2006), 107-108.

digitally salvaged work. In one such notable case, the popular first-person shooter *Counter Strike* (2000) was first produced as a player mod of Valve's *Half-Life* (1998) and the development and publishing company later partnered with the modders to officially release the title. Through these burgeoning modding practices, players in the PC industry can then intervene in media production spaces and quite literally make these games their own through these divergent, unofficial productions.

When discussing the history of modding communities, scholars have often highlighted the subversive and participatory power involved in these kinds of player-based co-production practices. Nick Dyer-Witheford and Greig de Peuter argue that the larger trend of game modding illustrates what they call a migratory multitude in which gamers use corporate media technology in ways that can oppose a game's capitalist and pro-military foundations and assumptions, such as refashioning a first-person shooter as a critique on war and the military industrial complex.³¹ On the other hand, Mia Consalvo studies how hobbyists mod Japanese games lacking international distribution and translate them for new audiences, while writing that "the act of hacking or translation becomes a way to play the game—but here play happens with the source code and original meaning."³² Similarly, Tom Welch notes how modding may not just constitute a new form of play in general but also offers a means for modders to queer gaming both in the sense of subverting a game's inherent rules and even providing meaningful queer representation through adjustments in a game's design—such as a player mod for *Stardew Valley* (2016) that rewrote the game's coding to allow for same-sex relationships.³³ The ability for modding to

³¹ Greig De Peuter and Nick Dyer-Witheford, *Games of Empire: Global Capitalism and Video Games* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2009).

³² Mia Consalvo, *Atari to Zelda: Japan's Videogames in Global Contexts* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 2016), 51.

³³ Tom Welch, "The Affectively Necessary Labour of Queer Mods," *Game Studies: The International Journal of Computer Game Research* 18, no. 3 (2018): np. <http://gamestudies.org/1803/articles/welch>.

overwrite a game's design would then offer players "a powerful tool for destabilizing the accepted norms of both the video game industry and naturalized gender and sexuality performance."³⁴ In these cases, the audience's intervention constitutes an opportunity to overwrite the ingrained assumptions in the industry, redefine what it means to 'play' with a game, and provide new means of engagement with gaming titles for a larger online community.

By taking control over a game's design, modding aligns with a broader trend in digital participatory cultures as the rise of online platforms and user-generated content have reshaped the cultural industries over the past two decades. Axel Bruns comments on this shift by describing the growing prevalence of the 'produser', or producing user, observing the growing opportunities for audiences to produce their own digital media and access new audiences through wikis, blogs, open source software, online videos, and even crafting and selling mechanics in the MMO game *Second Life* (2003).³⁵ Henry Jenkins has also written at length connecting emergent digital technologies with a larger history of fan participation and textual poaching, observing how digital technology has also "granted viewers greater control over media flows, enabled activists to reshape and recirculate media content, lowered the costs of production, and paved the way for new grassroots networks."³⁶ Meanwhile, Derek Johnson draws a specific connection between game modding and fan participatory cultures as he states that "modding fits squarely within an alternative production trajectory, including fan fiction, in that both practices appropriate and turn to new uses the resources of corporately produced culture to meet fans'

³⁴ Ibid.

³⁵ Axel Bruns, *Blogs, Wikipedia, Second Life and Beyond: From Production to Produsage* (New York: Peter Lang, 2008).

³⁶ Henry Jenkins, *Fans, Bloggers, and Gamers: Exploring Participatory Culture* (New York: New York University Press, 2006), 149.

unmet cultural needs.”³⁷ In these accounts on game modding and the larger history of participation cultures, we then see the participatory value and opportunities that access to alternative productions provide. However, these accounts are careful to acknowledge that user productions still essentially reside within the same spaces occupied by the broader media industries and are still influenced in a variety of ways by industry producers.

In game modding practices, users rely directly on the game industry’s output to source the materials for their own hobbyist creations. The PC game industry can then use these player production practices to enhance the value of their titles. Hector Postigo writes that “digital games and their content communities are part of a broader trend to profit from the work and interest surrounding a given commercial product” and that “the labor put into creating fan-made add-ons can have considerable value and scope” for the industry, such as prolonging the life of these games and even reviving audience interest in playing older titles.³⁸ Olli Sotamaa writes on how the industry has even cultivated free labor through mod competitions, framing this activity as a way to gain entry into the industry while the industry itself benefits from innovations that it need not pay for. He further writes that “it is not a secret that an increasing number of game industry professionals have a background in mod communities” and that industry professionals use this association to encourage forms of player labor that aligns with and benefits the industry.³⁹ While some in the field have framed modding as free labor though, scholars like David Hesmondhaugh and Hector Postigo have challenged the degree to which we might consider modding and the broader range of user-generated content a form of exploitation and have acknowledged the

³⁷ Derek Johnson, “*StarCraft* Fan Craft: Game Mods, Ownership, and Totally Incomplete Conversions,” *Velvet Light Trap* 64 (2009): 54

³⁸ Hector Postigo, “Of Mods and Modders: Chasing Down the Value of Fan-based Digital Game Modifications,” *Games and Culture* 2, no. 4 (2007): 311.

³⁹ Olli Sotamaa “On modder labour, commodification of play, and mod competitions,” *First Monday* 12, no. 9 (2007): np, <http://firstmonday.org/article/view/2006/1881>.

personal value modders can derive from this work, even as the media industry looks to harness and profit from these productions.⁴⁰ The precedent for PC modding communities then presents a history that has a complicated relationship with the game industry but nevertheless speaks to the broader opportunities that digital media can afford its users.

This history then provides a critical counterpoint for how online play could have worked in the console industry, given a different approach and different priorities for hardware and software design. However, the historical arc of platformisation and what Zittrain referred to as networks of control fundamentally altered the trajectory of the console generation's implementation of digital connectivity, cultivating a more circumscribed engagement with the digital game and user productions. To be clear, this does not mean the PC industry represents some utopian ideal for player creativity. Indeed, PC game producers have developed their own means of controlling user creations in recent years, particularly as producers have looked to gain legal ownership over modding creations with user-agreement forms. Additionally, the industry has leveraged the visibility of online stores like Steam to sell player mods to a larger audience while taking a cut of the profits.⁴¹ Even so, the networked play with the Xbox 360 and PlayStation 3 both purposefully use a black box design to undercut the audience's ability to 'play with the source code' in gaming and even if users find a way around the console's obfuscating designs, they would then compromise the ability to use these consoles as they were intended—namely, to modify a console one must effectively jailbreak it and take it offline. As a result, while console modding exists in a fashion, savvy players can only do so by fundamentally

⁴⁰ Hector Postigo, "Modding to the Big Leagues," *First Monday* 15, no. 5 (2010): np, <http://firstmonday.org/ojs/index.php/fm/article/view/2972/2530>; David Hesmondhaugh, "User generated content, free labour, and the cultural industries," *Ephemera* 10, no. 3 (2010)

⁴¹ Daniel James Joseph, "The Discourse of Digital Dispossession: Paid Modifications and Community Crisis on Steam," *Games and Culture* 13, no. 7 (2018).

repurposing their consoles and this both carries the risk of ruining the console itself and complicates the ability for modders to share this work with a larger gaming community. Meanwhile, the online console generations have found new ways to harness player creativity with games geared toward player-generated level design—such as *LittleBigPlanet* (2008), *Super Mario Maker* (2015), and *Dreams* (2020)—but typically allow user creation based on a more prescribed set of rules and limited toolkits and assets. Consequently, while player creativity remains a feature of online gaming in the networked console era, these creative outlets must contend with the incorporation of the console’s platform design.

Precarious Modding and *Breath of the Wild*’s ‘Second Wind’

When describing the limited affordances of the console platform and challenges to online creativity, I do not mean to say that game modding has been entirely eradicated on console systems or that the constraints of platform design create a deterministic engagement with media that fully disallows alternative practices. In fact, I open this chapter with examples from mods on *Breath of the Wild* to highlight these issues on platform governance while acknowledging the nuances of contemporary console-based user productions. Even so, despite the participatory spirit behind homebrewed console modding, the fact remains that these practices are actively working against the console’s design and that even in these exceptions to the rule there are clear limitations for this kind of player modding compared to PC gaming counterparts. To explore this precarity in console modding, I analyze the ambitious ‘Second Wind’ console mod for *Breath of the Wild* as a case study, projecting forward from this chapter’s discussion on early incorporations of the console’s black box design to see how players have attempted to circumvent these now established systems nearly two decades on. To demonstrate the state of contemporary console modding, I use discourse analysis to study the production details of the

‘Second Wind’ player-based expansion, how a well-organized modding group attempts to situate their work within the context of the industry and the game’s larger media life, and how the unofficial nature this production creeps into that discourse. Additionally, I use technological analysis of online guides involved with incorporating the mod on the Nintendo Switch and homebrewing the console itself to reveal the constraints and limitations of these productions.

Regarding the scope of this case study, I analyze the ‘Second Wind’ wiki, the modding community’s discord page, the ‘Second Wind’ *GitHub* installation page, and the group’s shared link to a Nintendo Switch homebrew guide that effectively jailbreaks the console by taking it offline and circumventing the system’s online platform, allowing the user to make direct changes to the console itself and to individual games. Additionally, while homebrew console guides extend to multiple official and unofficial platforms—specifically, the Nintendo Wii, the Nintendo Switch, and two different unofficial open-sourced emulators for these systems—I have focused specifically on the Nintendo Switch in my subsequent analysis. My decision for prioritizing the Nintendo Switch homebrew guide, particularly over the unofficial emulators, was primarily based on the fact that the guide can offer the most direct example of how the online console is designed to work by highlighting the means by which amateur hobbyist attempt to rewrite the system. However, it’s also worth pointing out that console emulators may require even greater technological literacy to operate, particularly if players are attempting to play legitimately owned versions of these games by copying cartridge data onto their personal computers, need frequent updates and optimizations, and that late-generation console emulators are typically rife with compatibility issues for individual game titles.⁴² Indeed, the ‘Second

⁴² Note: for more on the update information and list of known compatibility issues (which notably is subject to change with new updates for games), see the Yuzu Emulator home page: Yuzu Emulator Team, “Yuzu: Nintendo Switch Emulator,” *Yuzu*, accessed July 3, 2022, <https://yuzu-emu.org/>.

Wind’ discord page highlights the Nintendo Switch as the sole named console in its ‘Help and Bug Reports’ section and players often report crashing when attempting to use the mod on the emulator systems.⁴³ In this case, while homebrewing Nintendo’s official console carries risks, it would still be the likely choice for hobbyists looking to extend the life of console game titles through these player mods.

The *Breath of the Wild* ‘Second Wind’ project began when an unnamed collective of more than fifty modders released early downloads for a large-scale expansion of the Nintendo title in 2021, working on a planned two-part release with multiple updates and patches to troubleshoot any errors in the process of coding. The group has currently published a working version of their first sub-expansion, ‘The Ancient Trials’, as an open development-styled release that relies on other hobbyists and players downloading ‘Second Wind’ to work as informal playtesters. On the project’s main wiki page, the modders break down the impressive scope of their first in-progress release, which includes 2 new main quests, 27 new side quests, a new village, a new overworld mini-dungeon, and numerous new enemies and bosses, equipment, and fauna.⁴⁴ In an interview with *Polygon*, one of the core coders for the project, known by the handle Waikuteru, further commented that using other unofficial *Breath of the Wild* mods had inspired him to help organize the ‘Second Wind’ development community:

They must have triggered something special in me. New content for a beloved Nintendo game [...] whenever you want, and you can decide the content and quality [...] It just sounded like a dream!⁴⁵

⁴³ “Second Wind Hub - #troubleshooting-and-bugs!,” *Discord*, accessed July 3, 2022, <https://discord.com/channels/600679859257081884/927264339264692284>.

⁴⁴ “Second Wind Wiki,” *Fandom*, accessed July 3, 2022, https://secondwind.fandom.com/wiki/Project_Breakdown#The_Ancient_Island.

⁴⁵ Waikuteru, quoted by Chelsea Reed, “Breath of the Wild Fans are Making Expansive Mods while Waiting for the Sequel,” *Polygon*, April 21, 2022, <https://www.polygon.com/23034225/breath-of-the-wild-zelda-second-wind-mod-waikuteru>.

Notably, the way Waikuteru frames this commitment to modding aligns with the ways in which many PC modders viewed their own activity as an extension of their fandom and love for a game. The name of the mod, ‘Second Wind’, even directly suggests how the modders intend to breathe new life into Nintendo’s popular flagship title four years after its initial release. With that said, when users look further into how they can *actually* download and use this mod and others like it for their personal copies of *Breath of the Wild*, the optimism and promise involved with console modding must directly vie with the constraints of the console’s technological design.

On the ‘Second Wind’ discord, the modding group pointedly frames their release within industry terms. In the discord’s ‘#introduction’ page, they state up front that the expansion “aims to add new content to the game in a similar way to official DLCs” and their broader goal “that many come to see Second Wind as part of the definitive experience while playing *Breath of the Wild*.”⁴⁶ In this orientation to the ‘Second Wind’ mod, the community emphasizes associations with ‘official DLC’ and the ‘definitive experience’ of the game itself, clearly valuing the notion that they are contributing to the success of the game along with Nintendo’s own development team. Even so, while the modders take great efforts to align themselves with Nintendo’s product, other elements of the forum necessarily highlight the unofficial nature of their efforts. For example, in the discord channel’s ‘#rules’ section, the modders actively discourage users from discussing piracy and write that “we do not support piracy nor can we help you if you've pirated your copy of the game.”⁴⁷ Meanwhile, one of the key features of the group’s ‘#troubleshooting-and-bugs!’ page is to remind users that using multiple overlapping

⁴⁶ “Second Wind Hub - #introduction,” *Discord*, accessed July 3, 2022, <https://discord.com/channels/600679859257081884/640184036148641807>.

⁴⁷ “Second Wind Hub - #rules,” *Discord*, accessed July 3, 2022, <https://discord.com/channels/600679859257081884/831926976444235846>.

mods for the game can create issues with compatibility.⁴⁸ By mentioning pirated game copies and overlapping game mods, the group tacitly acknowledges the fringe space their community occupies. After all, the modders can't control if their audience views unsanctioned expansions of the game in the same light as unofficial copies of the core game as well, nor can they anticipate how their changes to the game's code might conflict with mods from other unofficial groups. More importantly, when users look to download and incorporate the 'Second Wind' mod for their copy of *Breath of the Wild*, these changes cannot be implemented intuitively, as they would be with official DLC purchased from Nintendo's platform marketplace. Instead, the discord '#downloads' page links the user both to the mod downloads hosted on software hosting site *GitHub* and an accompanying installation guide that walks players through the complicated and potentially fraught process of homebrewing their consoles.⁴⁹

On the 'Second Wind' *GitHub* installation page for the Nintendo Switch,⁵⁰ the modding group notes at the outset that the installation will first require both a homebrewed Switch console and either a digital or physical copy of the game itself. These requirements would then allow for players to augment their copy of *Breath of the Wild*, without needing to worry about software updates interfering with the modifications made to the title. Assuming that potential players meet these requirements, the installation page then details a series of complicated instructions about how to delete the core game's code directory from the Nintendo Switch *Breath of the Wild* cartridge or digital file, here called 'dumping the RomFS' (Read Only Memory Files System), installing a widely used *Breath of the Wild* mod manager called BCML (Breath of the Wild

⁴⁸ "Second Wind Hub - #troubleshooting-and-bugs!," *Discord*, accessed July 3, 2022, <https://discord.com/channels/600679859257081884/927264339264692284>.

⁴⁹ "Second Wind Hub - #downloads," *Discord*, accessed July 3, 2022, <https://discord.com/channels/600679859257081884/712317546245783572>.

⁵⁰ Torphedo, "Installing Second Wind for Nintendo Switch," *GitHub*, May 25, 2022, <https://github.com/Torphedo/BOTW-ModdingGuide/wiki/Installing-Second-Wind-for-Nintendo-Switch>.

Cross-Platform Mod Loader) that has compatibility the ‘Second Wind’ mod, and then using that mod manager to upload the overwritten file paths for the game that include this player-made expansion, all while relying on a PC to work as an intermediary to recode the game’s cartridge (or the game file downloaded from the console for digital copies). If users run into issues installing BCML, the guide provides instructions for setting up the mod manager manually, which actively relies on the user’s first-hand knowledge of the coding language Python.

Assuming a user has limited technological literacy but wants to play ‘Second Wind’ anyway, they could then be faced with the nerve-wracking endeavor of following instructions they may not fully understand to overwrite a game cartridge they presumably bought for upwards of 60 USD, and if they failed to install the mod manager necessary for that rewriting process, they would immediately be faced with a technological workaround that requires high level coding proficiency. Meanwhile, the installation guide does not actively warn players that mistakes made during this process could *brick* their game—a colloquial term used by hobbyists for when you render a game or console unplayable by attempting to make these changes incorrectly—though, admittedly, that omission may be in part due to an assumed technological literacy of their audience. On the other hand, the Nintendo Switch homebrew guide that the *GitHub* installation page links to, for users who have yet to jailbreak their console systems to allow for modding, demonstrates a far more detailed account of the risks and restrictions involved with this practice.

In the detailed guide for homebrewing the Nintendo Switch, the writers open with a series of disclaimers about what could go wrong during this process. Bracketed off in an aptly named section ‘! Danger’, the guide warns readers that if Nintendo finds evidence of players incorporating these homebrews they can and often have permanently banned user accounts, that “there is always a chance that your Nintendo Switch will brick” when making these changes to

the console, and that users need to be particularly careful about which homebrew software they use because “malicious homebrew exists [and] can brick your Switch or otherwise render your Switch inoperable.”⁵¹ These warnings are then concluded by the somewhat counter-imposed encouragement that if users follow the detailed, several-step instruction process on the homebrew guide page, “everything should be fine.”⁵² Much as with the ‘Second Wind’ discord page, the hobbyists behind this homebrew guide seek to embolden players to take this kind of control over their media but because the guide has to deal with the technological constraints of the console platform more directly, and pointedly disavow any responsibility if the homebrew process goes awry, the limitations involved with console modding become more clearly defined in the process.

The subsequent guidelines outline the process for how the Switch console can be overwritten and hacked, while acknowledging the measures Nintendo has taken with its console design to prevent successful homebrew set-ups. Regarding the specific steps involved, users would first force the Switch console into recovery mode, which is a standard computational subsystem meant to aid professional troubleshooting for malfunctioning consoles. Once in recovery mode, users can then hack the console through the system's SD port or through an HDMI cable connected to a PC, depending on the specific exploit used to customize the Switch's firmware and disconnect it from Nintendo's servers. Furthermore, the guide highlights the specific design oversights that two prominent exploits take advantage of to prompt a “full system takeover”—namely, the *fusee-gelee* exploit that uses a loophole in the system recovery mode to launch the customized firmware “even before the normal bootloader code” that the Switch's

⁵¹ noahc3, “Before Starting,” *Homebrew Guide*, accessed July 3, 2022, <https://switch.homebrew.guide/gettingstarted/beforestarting.html>

⁵² Ibid.

built-in firmware uses when the console powers up, or the *Deja-vu* exploit that similarly launches before the “warmboot firmware (the code that runs when you put your Switch to sleep and wake it up).”⁵³ Notably, though, the guide warns that Nintendo made changes to later versions of their console’s hardware along with more fine-tuned updates for the console operating system to prevent these exploits, learning from security lapses over the course of the console’s lifetime. As mentioned earlier in the chapter, the console’s ability to streamline updates not only for individual games but for the console’s firmware itself offers industry producers a higher degree of control over player interventions and this back-and-forth between the industry and enterprising console hackers then outlines the degree to which the console’s networked control can operate as a response to unsanctioned digital change.

Given Nintendo’s attempts to patch their console, and quite literally patch up the holes in their firmware’s code used to hack the Switch and allow for modding, the guides must then contend with the possibility that Nintendo has versioned-out their established exploits. In this case, the step-by-step homebrew guidelines highlight notices that if an exploit doesn’t function in a particular way it’s intended to or if running the exploit results in a specific error code, “unfortunately your Nintendo Switch is likely patched.” The guide further specifies that if the player owns a patched Switch but has only downloaded Nintendo’s console system update to version 4.1.0, there remain potential workarounds to install the customized homebrew, but that “if your Switch is patched and running a higher firmware version, unfortunately your Switch cannot be hacked right now.”⁵⁴ In these technical explanations, the underlying context can then suggest that console modding belies a dynamic process wherein players not only attempt to circumvent platform control but also to stay one step ahead of the console’s firmware revisions.

⁵³ Ibid.

⁵⁴ Ibid.

This tension between the game industry's efforts in online console design and the user's desire to take control over that technology belies a larger struggle over ideas of ownership in digital media industries. For instance, the history and legal interventions involved with audiences jailbreaking iPhones reveal how larger technology companies attempt to discourage user tampering. Apple first released the iPhone in 2007—notably, around the same time period that the video game industry released their own online consoles—and had built-in user agreements that stated their customers could not “modify, or create derivative works of the iPhone Software,” a disclosure that was then reiterated in subsequent versions of user-agreements that accompanied each update in Apple's iPhone firmware.⁵⁵ With that said, for the first few years of the phone's release, Apple avoided making direct legal interventions on users jailbreaking their devices, until an underground app developer created a rival app store called Cydia, made exclusively for jailbroken devices, which “specialized in selling apps that Apple would reject or ban (or already has).”⁵⁶ Once jailbreaking the iPhone led to a distinct challenge to Apple's ‘App Store’ and its market control on application revenue, the company publicly claimed these practices were illegal and attempted to press the issue on copyright regulation. Critically, though, a 2010 federal appeals court decision upheld the user's ability to circumvent the iPhone's operating system, while regulators at the time stated that this activity “fits comfortably within the four corners of fair use.”⁵⁷ This public struggle between audiences and larger technology companies likewise prompted writers to consider the agency of a new wave of technology hackers, which could constitute what Paolo Magaudda calls a “symbolic manipulation” in

⁵⁵ U.S. Copyright Office – Library of Congress, “In the Matter of Exemption on Circumvention of Copyright Protection Systems for Access Control Technologies,” June 2010, https://www.wired.com/images_blogs/threatlevel/2010/06/applejailbreakresponse-1.pdf.

⁵⁶ Brian X. Chen, “Rejected by Apple, iPhone Developers Go Underground,” *Wired*, August 6, 2009, <https://www.wired.com/2009/08/cydia-app-store/>.

⁵⁷ David Kravets, “U.S. Declares iPhone Jailbreaking Legal, Over Apple's Objections,” July 26, 2010, <https://www.wired.com/2010/07/feds-ok-iphone-jailbreaking/>.

consumer culture.⁵⁸ However, the larger history of jailbreaking reveals more subtle ways in which Apple has benefitted from their persistent user agreement clauses, particularly as the company maintains any jailbreaking would void user warranties for repairs, warns users that jailbreaking could create security concerns, and even states in a press release:

Some unauthorized modifications have caused damage to iOS that is not repairable. This can result in the hacked iPhone, iPad, or iPod touch becoming permanently inoperable when a future Apple-supplied iOS update is installed.⁵⁹

Much like with the video game console industry, Apple's technological control relies heavily on their ability to establish value and even general operability through keeping their devices connected and updated. The decision to jailbreak these devices must then accompany a broader commitment to taking your media offline in order to have that 'fair use' control over your own technology.⁶⁰

When discussing platform governance, black box technological designs, and the changing culture around player interventions in online gaming, it can be tempting to read this shift in design as a total loss of player control. However, by isolating a case study of console modding taken well after these online console designs were first established, we can see a far more volatile dynamic between modders and console producers taking shape. By looking at the stubborn and precarious modding practices with Nintendo's *Breath of the Wild*, we can better understand the ongoing tension between hobbyists looking to find ways to take control over these sanctioned online consoles and the console producers actively revising their systems to

⁵⁸ Paolo Magaudda, "Hacking Practices and the Relevance for Consumer Studies: The Example of the 'Jailbreaking' of the iPhone," *Consumers, Commodities, and Consumption* 12, no.1 (2010): np. <https://csrn.camden.rutgers.edu/newsletters/12-1/magaudda.htm>.

⁵⁹ "Unauthorized Modification of iOS Can Cause Security Vulnerabilities, Instability, Shortened Battery Life, and Other Issues," *Apple*, June 15, 2018, <https://support.apple.com/en-us/HT201954>.

⁶⁰ See also: Ted Striphas, "The Abuses of Literacy: Amazon Kindle and the Right to Read," *Communication and Critical/Cultural Studies* 7, no. 3 (2010).

prevent the same kind of player interventions that had previously defined an entire era of digital media consumption in PC online gaming. Meanwhile, the scale of difficulty in incorporating player mods rises considerably not only because modders must find ways to override a console's black box design but also because modders lack an easy outlet to distribute these changes to a wider audience. In this case, the scale of these communities and the opportunities for sharing player mods diminish as the degree of technological knowledge and experience required places many users on the sidelines of these participatory cultures.

***LittleBigPlanet 3* and Console-Based Creativity**

While acknowledging the precarity involved with console modding helps to reveal how the console's hardware and operating system may discourage and complicate participatory efforts, it is also useful to consider what console-sanctioned player creativity and production ultimately looks like. To that end, it's worth noting that one of the PlayStation 3's first flagship titles was Media Molecule's level-creation game *LittleBigPlanet*, which made use of the console's newly networked capacities to create a community and unifying platform for console-sanctioned player creation. The Sony-exclusive game became a great success, selling roughly 5.85 million units over the course of the game's lifetime,⁶¹ while spawning two sequels, *LittleBigPlanet 2* (2011) and *LittleBigPlanet 3*; two handheld ports for the PSP and PS Vita; and several spin-off games including *LittleBigPlanet Karting* (2012), the iOS-released *Run Sackboy! Run!* (2014), and most recently *Sackboy: A Big Adventure* (2020). The growing popularity of level creation games can also be seen in more recent releases like *Dreams* (notably made by the same developers as *LittleBigPlanet*) or Nintendo's *WarioWare: D.I.Y.* (2009), *Super Mario*

⁶¹ "Little Big Planet," *VGChartz*, accessed July 3, 2022, <https://www.vgchartz.com/game/12390/littlebigplanet/sales>.

Maker, and *Super Mario Maker 2* (2019). When discussing how these games situate player creativity, John Banks writes:

The particular significance of titles [like *LittleBigPlanet*] is that they integrate co-creative media culture into the very core of the gaming experience and the video game business. *LittleBigPlanet*'s tag 'Play, Create, Share' foregrounds the centrality of this co-creativity.⁶²

In fact, both the *LittleBigPlanet* and *Super Mario Maker* series make a point to pair their creator platform with a more traditional single-player campaign meant to foreground the possibilities of the level creation system. The developers will even lock potential game assets away until players have moved through different levels of these campaigns. Ultimately, though, the value of the titles relies on the potential creativity of the games' users and how the game as a platform can work to showcase that creativity to a larger player community online.

In the chapter's final case study, I will specifically look at how *LittleBigPlanet 3* frames its level creator and tutorials to new players, what the game ultimately allows for in terms of its creative practices, and how the online hosting of these productions creates challenges for to the previously mentioned maxim of 'play, share, create'. I specifically chose *LittleBigPlanet 3* not only because it represents a culmination of the efforts and strategies that structure the emergent genre of level creation games, but also because the game is currently the last of the main franchise titles to still have online server support. In the process of analyzing the game, I will then do so with the understanding that the title's waning online engagement likewise creates a meaningful dimension of this analysis and has broader implications for writing historical case

⁶² John Banks, *Co-Creating Videogames* (London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2013), 15.

studies on games that require online hosting and a committed audience to define their gaming experiences.

To start with, it's worth pointing out how the game presents its overall goals to new users. When players start *LittleBigPlanet 3* up on their consoles, they are met with a warm voiceover from series regular Stephen Fry who waxes poetic on the virtues of creative innovation while the game shows idyllic film footage of children and young adults playing with crafts, riding skateboards, and generally embracing play and imagination, before the filmed footage ends with a bird's eye view of a large city being filled with colorful, animated crafts pouring through the streets like parade floats. As the game transitions into its pointedly crafted video game aesthetic, it then draws a familiar association between a nostalgic open-ended presentation of play and the promise of a video game corollary that goes a step further to share these creations with a worldwide audience. The voice over continues to extol these values as players are ushered into the game's main menu central hub (or the POD), which Fry refers to as: "Your home base to adventure. Your window into the Wonderplane. Your exploratorium for the vastness that is the Imagisphere." Naturally, the game writers have used playfully exalted language here but the game fundamentally describes *LittleBigPlanet 3*'s scope as one filled with adventure, a vastness of imagination, and an online space for creativity that is potentially boundless. Fry's guiding voice then points out that players can customize their main menu POD space with *LittleBigPlanet* 'stickers' (found by completing levels), can invite "friends over" suggesting the game's networked co-op play features, and can start the game in earnest "once you're ready". At this point, players gain the ability to move their crafted Sackboy avatar around the POD space and can initiate the game by stepping up to a PlayStation controller at the center of this customizable room. Notably, all three games of the series feature the initial POD area to open

these games, which most principally functions as a customizable online lobby space for co-op meetings with friends online. Meanwhile, this framing mechanic for the main menu reiterates the crafting aesthetic of the game and gets players used to the idea of controlling the Sackboy avatar (or Sackgirl, if users change their preferences) as a way to navigate the game's various features.

When players approach the controller for the first time, Fry's tutorial voice over kicks in once again and guides players to a suggested starting point—the individual campaign. Even so, the game works to strike a balance between a curated form of engagement with the game and the promise of an open-ended space of creativity, as the voice over states:

The entire Imagisphere is but a flick of the LEFT STICK and tap of the ACTION
BUTTON away. Why not stretch your legs by picking the PLAY option.

The 'PLAY' feature's solo campaign is likewise the first option highlighted for users in this menu set up and if they readily follow the game's advice, they find themselves beginning with choices 'Adventure', 'Challenge', 'Popit Puzzles', and 'More Stories', which have all been crafted by developers to give players a sense of what they could conceivably create using the game's front-facing level creation software. With that said, the game does allow players to jump off the deep end into the level creator and tutorials if they so choose by selecting the 'Create' option, a freedom that may also reflect the fact that since this is the third entry in the series and players may be well accustomed to *LittleBigPlanet*'s overall setup. Similarly, the menu's 'Community' tab would take players directly into the larger publishing space where other player creations are ranked and distributed to the *LittleBigPlanet* audience.

Many of the other options on the home menu involve cultivating the game's social dimensions of play. The 'All About Me' page that takes players to their customizable user profile and indicates how many published levels they have and how many likes those levels have

garnered from other players. Similarly, the ‘My Friends’ tab keeps track of any PlayStation Network friends who have profiles for the game and ‘planets’ filled with published levels that you can visit, as well as who among your friends are currently online. Meanwhile, the ‘Dive In’ option lets players “jump straight into a multiplayer game” and the ‘Recent Activity’ option gives players a list of the most recently published game levels. With that in mind, while the game does steer you toward the ‘Play’ feature as a point of orientation for *LittleBigPlanet*, its larger host of features clearly base the gaming experience predominantly on the player’s ability to create and experience the creativity of others. Lastly, the sole remaining menu option would send players to *LittleBigPlanet*’s online store, where they can purchase customizable ‘costumes’ (or skins) for their avatar; bundled packages that include costumes, stickers, and/or level creator assets; and a DLC expansion to the story which also feature new decorations and game assets.

As for the specific ‘Create’ section for the game, *LittleBigPlanet 3* once again structures the menu option into subsections: ‘My Moon’, which acts as a storage space for creating levels; ‘My Earth’, which only shows the levels you’ve published on the *LittleBigPlanet* level-sharing platform; and ‘Tutorials’, which provide players a total of 190 short videos that show players how to play the game, how to create levels, and how to publish. When players use their ‘Moon’ to jump into creating levels, Fry’s voice over once again greets the players and expresses excitement over their new creative ventures, then notably places that creativity within the context of publishing and lending material to the larger gaming community as he states “remember the *LittleBigPlanet* ethos - I create, therefore I share!” Meanwhile, a pop-up menu notes that players presently have a small set of development tools to start out with but that they can open the ‘Advanced Create Mode’ to access the entirety of the level creator tool suite. Once again, the game attempts to offer players a slow ramp-up to their work in the game, while maintaining the

option for players to access everything available to them all at once. Meanwhile, the ‘Creation Mode’ centers its functionality around the player’s avatar, where Sackboy or Sackgirl flies around a paused level and acts as a hub for the game’s development tools and asset library; while the ‘Play Mode’ allows players to ground their avatars and test how their level plays out in real-time.

In this opening walkthrough detailing how the game orients its players to *LittleBigPlanet* 3, we can then identify a few important themes to explore further. First, the game is pointedly not *just* a novice-friendly development tool, it is also a platformer with a distinct brand and following. Much like with *Super Mario Maker*, the game encourages creativity within the bounds of making a *LittleBigPlanet*-branded experience and so the subsequent development tools will feature platforming elements and detailed assets that have been established and popularized within the *LittleBigPlanet* story mode campaigns—which may also be why the game steers players toward the ‘Play’ feature during its introduction. Second, the game may celebrate the platonic ideal of creativity but that discussion of creating is always framed within the context of sharing as well, i.e. the stated ethos of ‘I create, therefore I share’, and the game downplays the necessary limits and constraints involved with creating levels that other users can play online. Third, it is worth considering how much of the game’s functionality and suggested uses described in this walkthrough rely on an engaged audience, prompting us to consider what it means for players to own a game that gives a window of access to a level creator platform and its shared work rather than owning the full experience of the game outright.

LittleBigPlanet establishes its brand at the game’s outset with a crafted aesthetic that reinforces both the look of the platform levels and the gameplay mechanics. The game’s persistently central avatar has been designed to look like a homemade stuffed doll with clear

stitch lines and a front-facing zipper (a model that Etsy crafters have gamely turned into physical stuffed dolls for purchase; Figure 1), the POD he initially occupies takes the shape of a cardboard spaceship, and the larger world in which the avatar inhabits features similarly tactile designs with cushions, cloth, yarn, wood, and cardboard assets structuring the platforming levels—all to give the symbolic impression of real life crafting. Additionally, developers pair this craft aesthetic with a purposefully exaggerated physics engine to differentiate itself from other platformers, as a review for the first *LittleBigPlanet* details:

The classic run, jump and grab gameplay comes straight from the Mario tradition, but the way the physics works on balloons, bungee cords, skateboards, springs, rope swings, dangling girders and mine trains makes all the old clichés feel fresh once again.⁶³

These branded elements no doubt offer the *LittleBigPlanet* franchise a particular charm and recognizability, but they also create specific parameters for the kinds of creativity that is available to players. To that end, the game tutorials for level design largely offer elaborations on the established mechanics of a *LittleBigPlanet* platform level, such as learning how to incorporate prize bubbles and collectibles, wobbling girders, springs, elastics, pistons, wormholes, slides, and thrusters. Additionally, even the more advanced tools that would seem to give players greater flexibility in their design still use the craft aesthetic as a fundamental principle, such as the level creator UV Tool which lets you ‘scroll, spin, and resize the textures on a material’ or the Corner Editor that let’s players distort the shapes of established assets by ‘pulling on the corner’ of the object in question. Admittedly, the game’s level creation parameters still leave a wide breadth of possibilities for player-created levels but nevertheless

⁶³ Stuart Andrews, “LittleBigPlanet Review,” *Trusted Reviews*, November 4, 2008, <https://www.trustedreviews.com/reviews/littlebigplanet>.

function to preserve a continuity with the game's story mode levels and the recognizable brand of the franchise.



Figure 1

The game likewise demonstrates the influence of its branded experience as it incorporates costume packs into its larger digital business model. In these cases, the developer embraces elements of established modding practices through this use of its DLC add-ons but notably commodifies the avatar design changes and sanctions them within specific copyright licensing agreements. Looking through the *LittleBigPlanet 3* store, players find the ability to refashion their Sackboy or Sackgirl avatars to resemble craft versions of recognizable game, film, and TV characters like the Big Daddy mechas from *Bioshock*, Doc Brown from *Back to the Future*, or Garnet from *Steven Universe* (Figure 2). These align with broader PC modding practices, where the modders will incorporate famous characters into incongruous settings, such as the player-mod to bring *The Mandalorian*'s Grogu into *Grand Theft Auto: Online*.⁶⁴ With *LittleBigPlanet 3*, though, players not only have to purchase these skins but tacitly agree with specific user

⁶⁴ Uzzzi47, TheRahijo, and InvOrange, "Baby Yoda/Grogu from The Mandalorian," *GTAside*, November 12, 2020, <https://www.gtainside.com/en/sanandreas/skins/157214-baby-yoda-grogu-from-the-mandalorian/>.

agreements in the process. For example, when purchasing the ‘Bioshock Mini Pack’, a scrolling text to the right of the online store notes:

This item is being licensed or sublicensed to you by Sony Computer Entertainment America and is subject to the Network Terms of Service and User Agreement [...] If you do not wish to accept all these terms, do not download this item.

The user agreements in question then prohibit any unsanctioned use of the established copyrighted characters, such as attempting to port these player models to game mods outside of *LittleBigPlanet* series. Similarly, while the game gives you the option to change your avatar it does so within the context of seeing Sackboy and Sackgirl versions of these characters, situating these changes within the governing aesthetic of the game’s world.



Figure 2

Furthermore, while the game frames its approach to level design as part of an open-ended, freeing form of creativity, it will also must frame that creativity within a broader impulse to share, as published user-generated work clearly establishes a substantial part of the game’s

overall value. In the same early review of the first *LittleBigPlanet* quoted above, the writer struggled to grasp how exactly to describe this online platform approach that was altogether new for console gaming, opening with a series of questions about whether *LittleBigPlanet* represented the “rebirth of the classic 2D platform game” or “a social gaming app – a sort of MySpace or Facebook of video games.”⁶⁵ Looking over the initial main menu options in the walkthrough, producers reinforce the value of these player-made contributions by offering multiple options to play online and join the *LittleBigPlanet* ‘Community’ right away. As mentioned above, the most consistent overlapping game feature on that menu involves exploring user-generated content, highlighting how these contributions can renew player interest in the game and continually add value to the *LittleBigPlanet* experience. These co-productions could arguably be considered a form of free labor that has become a central feature of the digital media industries, as characteristically unpaid and freely given work that constitutes what Tiziana Terranova calls “an important, yet unacknowledged, source of value in advanced capitalist societies.”⁶⁶ Admittedly, though, this free labor is not solely for the industry’s benefit and players may buy *LittleBigPlanet*, in part, because they enjoy exploring the game’s intuitive and accessible approach to game development and sharing their work with an established audience. Still, it remains important to consider that when Banks describes this growing genre as working to cultivate a co-creative culture into both the gaming experience *and* the video game business, the latter consideration should prompt us to question what changes about that culture when it becomes part and parcel of an industry’s business model.

For one thing, the fact that users create on an established platform geared toward all ages and meant to represent the game’s overall brand identity puts restrictions on the kind of content

⁶⁵ Stuart Andrews, 2008.

⁶⁶ Tiziana Terranova, *Network Culture: Politics of the Information Age* (London: Pluto Press, 2004), 73.

that can be created. Most specifically, *LittleBigPlanet 3* adopts a platform moderation feature called ‘Good Grief!’, which allows players to report content “that is offensive, illegal, or otherwise not suitable for sharing online within *LittleBigPlanet*” (Figure 3). These policies have led to numerous instances where users attempt to push the boundaries of *LittleBigPlanet*’s user agreements and community standards, such as referencing copyrighted work, only to find their levels removed from the platform. For instance, in the opening days of the first *LittleBigPlanet*’s release, one report noted that “levels featuring content from games and other media including Metal Gear Solid, The Legend of Zelda, Batman and Scrubs have all been removed from the servers – with users complaining that they have spent hours creating content and have no back-up of their work.”⁶⁷ Additionally, using the *LittleBigPlanet* level creation platform also creates constraints in terms of scale, as the levels require a limited number of assets and content to play on game’s server as a stand-alone level, rather than level design that allows for multiple load screens. To this point, when players first load the ‘Moon’ level creator, they’ll see a thermometer on the left hand of the screen that represents how many assets and gameplay features a player can load into a particular level. In different ways, then, the standards of the platform encourage particular uses and norms with player sharing and stake out clear boundaries within the game’s ‘vastness that is the Imagisphere’.

⁶⁷ Matt Martin, “LittleBigPlanet Levels Removed over Copyright Fears,” *gameindustry.biz*, November 10, 2008, <https://www.gamesindustry.biz/articles/littlebigplanet-levels-removed-over-copyright-fears>.

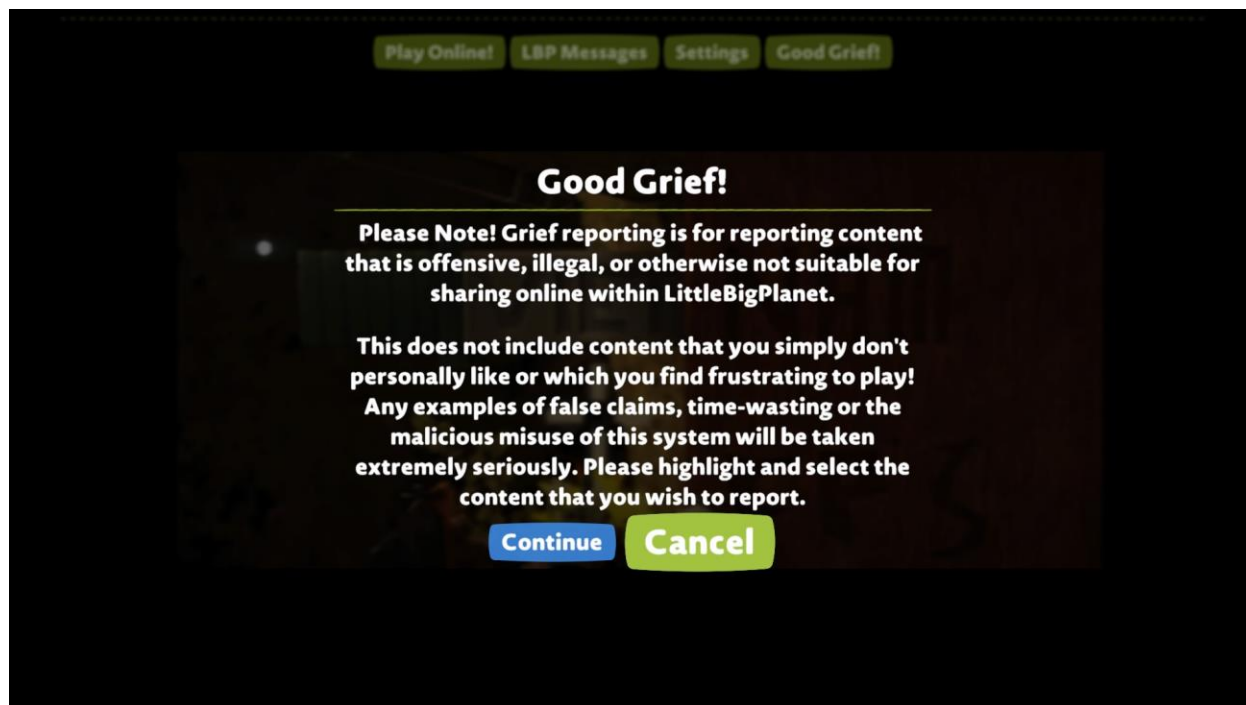


Figure 3

Admittedly, though, the game's constraints do serve a purpose and the game still provides enough flexibility for players to explore unexpected uses for the level creation platform within *LittleBigPlanet*'s fixed parameters. To that end, players have used the game to create an unnecessarily complicated calculator, a Daft Punk concert with an accompanying laser show, and even a highly publicized marriage proposal.⁶⁸ Moreover, while the game's boundaries may not allow much room for the kind of transgressive potential discussed in PC modding cultures, I would argue it is not inherently problematic to frame a level creation game within the context of a specific brand. After all, many *LittleBigPlanet* creators may enjoy creating within the confines of this world just as other creators would enjoy writing fan fiction for their favorite films and TV shows. Instead, I believe the trouble lies less with what *LittleBigPlanet* disallows as an individual game and more with what the online console disallows for creative practices writ large. In the

⁶⁸Dan Crawley, "Six Million LittleBigPlanet User Levels Created; Here are Some of the Best," *Venture Beat*, January 17, 2012, <https://venturebeat.com/2012/01/17/six-million-littlebigplanet-user-levels-created-here-are-some-of-the-best/view-all/>.

console market, player-based game design seemingly must take place either within the tightly controlled, officially sanctioned, and copyrighted environments of games like *LittleBigPlanet* or in the precarious, user-agreement voiding, technologically complex field of console modding—with no discernible middle ground between these two extremes. Meanwhile, the broader design principles behind walled garden approaches to gaming shifts these creative practices away from a precedent of digital downloads in PC modding, which users could own in perpetuity, to a platform standard for user creation that relies on online hosting.

With this final distinction, we can consider the limitations of level creators like *LittleBigPlanet* and *Super Mario Maker* not just within the context of their branding, their established mechanics, their limited assets, or their content moderation, but also in terms of ownership and access. In Mark Andrejevic's discussion on user-generated content and labor, he argues that the larger infrastructure supporting the creation of this online content remains a critical consideration, particularly when it is "a privately-owned, commercial one that structures the terms of access."⁶⁹ Applying this logic to the level creator case study, part of what structures that access is a reliance on the online content being privately hosted by industry producers and when enough time passes or a game ceases to be profitable enough to justify hosting, the game's broader functionality vanishes along with that server support. As mentioned earlier, we can see the consequences of this fleeting temporality of online titles just by considering how the first two *Little Big Planet* games, along with the PlayStation 3 version of *Little Big Planet 3*, have all had their online services discontinued. Notably, Media Molecule framed its decision to remove the game's online functionality for the majority of its titles based on security issues following a

⁶⁹ Mark Andrejevic, "Exploiting YouTube: Contradictions of User-Generated Labor," in *YouTube Reader*, edited by Pelle Snickars and Patrick Vonderau (Stockholm: National Library of Sweden, 2010), 418.

user's DDOS (distributed denial-of-service) attack on the game's different servers,⁷⁰ which involves flooding a platform or site to prevent users from accessing it, but it's not a coincidence that the only title that remained online after security patches was the PlayStation 4 version of *LittleBigPlanet 3*.⁷¹ After all, this would be the console that Sony would put the most efforts into shoring up its broader firmware security. Even if the DDOS attack had not prompted Media Molecule to act, the dilemma of deciding when to discontinue online services for the older games would have persistently loomed as these considerations of hosting have steadily become a fixture in the online console industry. With that in mind, the player's terms of access for online services cannot be separated from the business imperatives of the private companies running these hosted platforms.

Conclusion

When we consider the stakes of digital change in our cultural industries, we must start by understanding how the technological infrastructures of media have changed and how that technology reflects and even influences broader cultural practices. While new technology does not guarantee a prescribed use, it does shift the perceived boundaries of what may or may not be possible with media consumption and online play, regardless of whether you are part of the media industry or the audience. Through the console industry's evolving approach to online gaming, players slowly find themselves in a position of having less clear control and even less definitive ownership over their media. The console industry's adoption of online connectivity then coincides with a broader intention to use a black box framework to reinforce that dynamic

⁷⁰Tom Phillips, "LittleBigPlanet Servers Offline as Fans Report DDOS Attack," *EuroGamer*, last updated March 18, 2021, <https://www.eurogamer.net/littlebigplanet-servers-offline-as-fans-report-ddos-attack>.

⁷¹Ian Carlos Campbell, "LittleBigPlanet Online Security Issues Blamed for Permanent Server Shutdown on PS3 and Vita," *The Verge*, September 13, 2021, <https://www.theverge.com/2021/9/13/22672201/littlebigplanet-servers-shutdown-hacks-offensive-messages>.

of control. With that distinction in mind, one can see why jailbreaking black box devices like game consoles could be called a form of ‘symbolic manipulation’, because the act of overriding a closed-off device directly challenges the industry’s suggested uses and norms of digital media. In fact, we might consider these more global technological interventions in the same spirit as how writers like Galloway and Welch describe the potential for modders to overturn gaming’s inherent rules, assumptions, and ideologies. Even so, the ideal of player intervention and subversive practices must necessarily be considered within a larger dynamic wherein the industry can revise its technology in response to its audience’s practices.

When we consider the history of new media and how digital technology has increasingly augmented and refined existing business strategies, a consistent theme is a loss of control for users. For example, as streaming actively replaces DVD and Blu-ray as the industry standard for the film and TV home distribution market, audiences see a change from owning their media to subscribing for access to that media, which in turn may only exist on streaming platforms for limited periods of licensing. Furthermore, even if users look to take advantage of the horizontal distribution in digital media to create content on a platform like YouTube, they still have to vie with not controlling the terms of their access, which could then lead to issues on the platform’s use of demonetization, particularly when a privately-owned site like YouTube applies a “*tiered-governance*” approach, in which different users—amateurs, professionalized amateurs, legacy media organizations, and YouTube’s contracted producers of original content—are held to different standards in different ways.”⁷² With that said, I do not see this apparent loss of control over media as a static process and I believe the audience still maintains some degree of influence

⁷² Robyn Caplan and Tarleton Gillespie, “Tiered Governance and Demonetization: The Shifting Terms of Labor and Compensation in the Platform Economy,” *Social Media + Society* (2020): 6, emphasis in original.

when looking to challenge the media industry's use of digital affordances. Looking specifically at the game industry, I believe the creation of an online console black box eventually portends a larger rift between industry producers looking to establish new digital norms for both game production and distribution, and the audience's own active response to changes in the way games are sold, how they can be played online, and how the game can be changed after it has been released to the public.

Throughout this dissertation, I will highlight how the console industry's approach to online gaming ultimately reveals a growing reliance on *digital revisionism* and indicates changes for gaming cultures. Through digital revisionism, the game industry effectively applies the digital affordance of change and variability as a means of regulation, a bulwark for controversy, and a method of fine-tuning engrained digital business models. At the same time, the industry's frequent use of revision can also present audiences a means to apply pressure, as the precedent for change suggests a clear way forward when audiences can sufficiently galvanize themselves and demand better practices from the industry. In the following chapters, I will examine how these digital norms take shape, how the industry uses digital change to its advantage, and how audiences can attempt to influence the industry even as the technology seems to push them further away from their ability to intervene on the text itself and alters the way they interact with digital commodities.

Chapter 2: DLC and the [Expanding/Enclosing] Digital Game

In a 2018 Netflix quarterly earnings report, the streaming giant offered a curious admission about the broad diversity of their market competition for screen time, stating “we compete with (and lose to) ‘Fortnite’ more than HBO.”¹ In fact, during that same year Epic’s popular online shooter reportedly made an industry record-setting 2.4 billion dollars, while online publications struggled for ways to classify the game’s social dynamic that apparently fueled its financial success. Technology journalist Owen Williams claimed that *Fortnite* felt different from other games “because it’s not even about the game at all: it’s a place we’re all going together. Not only is Fortnite the new hangout spot, replacing the mall, Starbucks or just loitering in the city, it’s become the coveted ‘third place’ for millions of people around the world.”² Notably, the game’s social environment benefits from the fact that players can freely download *Fortnite* on different gaming platforms, while the game subtly ties the player’s social gaming experience to an optional digital marketplace. Indeed, it’s notable that Williams’ account of *Fortnite*’s popularity mentions how the game displaces the physical shopping mall, which also functions as a social space characterized by potential commerce. As *Fortnite* has become a cultural fixture in gaming, the developer has found a multitude of ways to renew the game’s appeal through *Fortnite* ‘season’ expansions and to sell add-ons that diversify the game’s social characteristics.

Starting with Season 1 on October 27th, 2017, *Fortnite* has released 21 seasons to date, while subdividing their seasons into larger chapters after Season 10. Meanwhile, the developers

¹ Kevin Webb, “Netflix Says It’s More Worried About Competition from Video Games Like ‘Fortnite’ Than Other Streaming Services,” *Business Insider*, January 18, 2019, <https://www.businessinsider.com/netflix-fortnite-competition-q4-earnings-2019-1>.

² Owen Williams, “Fortnite Isn’t a Game, It’s a Place,” *Charged* (blog), December 7, 2019, https://char.gd/blog/2018/fortnite-is-the-new-hangout-spot?utm_source=newsletter&utm_medium=email&utm_campaign=newsletter_axiosam&stream=top.

used the season structure to renew interest in the game with new maps, new themes and game lore, and even tie-ins to specific eSport events. Beyond these baseline expansions, the developer ties *Fortnite*'s seasons to its tiered subscription services that provide numerous add-ons, such as new cosmetic skins, equipment, emotes, and dances for the limited period of that season. Within these reward systems, Epic increasingly leverages the game's popularity to benefit from collaborative tie-ins with popular film, TV, and comic book franchises, such as with their *Spider-Man* and *Star Wars*-themed add-on packages (Figure 1). Additionally, Epic gamifies their add-on perks within their 'Battle Pass' service, as players pay a subscription fee to access the game's add-on reward system and then have to earn the rewards they paid for in a progression system based on an additional virtual currency players earn as they level up through online play. Within this complicated market structure, Epic uses the temporary nature of the seasons to push players to continually invest through an *artificial scarcity* digital business model as Epic warns players that "rewards from a Battle Pass can only be earned in that season, and will not be available in later seasons."³ The game's online adaptability then ensures the developer can finetune these economic appeals based on what seems to work best with their audience. In the process, developers benefit from harnessing *Fortnite*'s social 'hangout' status by framing add-ons as an optional means of digital expression. When players do buy into these systems while playing with their friends online, they reinforce the link between a communal space and its commodification.

³"What is the Battle Pass? Where can I learn more?" *Epic Games*, accessed June 30, 2022, <https://www.epicgames.com/help/en-US/fortnite-c75/battle-royale-c93/what-is-the-battle-pass-where-can-i-learn-more-a3271>

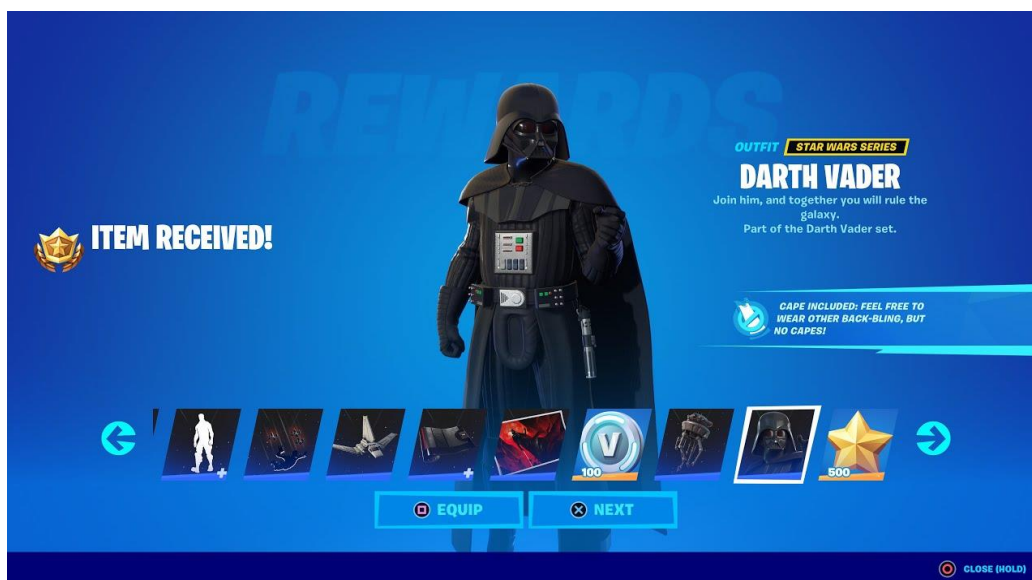


Figure 1

Epic's use of season expansions, add-ons, and virtual currencies marks a maturation of digital market strategies that have evolved across gaming platforms for several decades. In the case of *Fortnite*, Epic has used digital expansions to extend the game's content over the last five years since its initial release with no clear end in sight. Other popular online console titles like Bungie's *Destiny 2* (2017), Nintendo's *Super Smash Bros. Ultimate* (2018), and Respawn's *Apex Legends* (2019) have similarly based their game's appeal on releasing additional content at a deliberate pace across months and years, building on a consistent framework of gameplay with new maps, characters, weapons, outfits, and so on. Game producers can then use this post-release content to create different purchasing tiers—either through a subscription-based distribution model, a series of individual add-on purchases, or a combination of the two—all while theoretically giving the audience several ways to economically opt-into or out of a game's continued revival. Additionally, game developers often integrate in-game economies within these digital distribution models, which tie virtual currency to game mechanics in increasingly complex ways. These efforts to commodify expansions and add-on content then converge into a

consolidated effort to maximize a game's economic threshold and push the marketplace toward the game space itself.

From a historical standpoint, these market strategies owe a considerable debt to PC gaming trends dating back to the 1990s, as the industry worked to expand on gaming content and take advantage of online networks and new technology. Most notably, developers used the consistent engagement of massive online role-playing games (MMORPGs)—such as with the influential titles *EverQuest* (1999) and *World of Warcraft* (2004)—to retain gamers within a subscription-based service that developers could modify indefinitely. As the PC industry continued to experiment with network affordances that consoles had not yet implemented, they pioneered online-based development strategies to create an unprecedented flow of entertainment within the self-contained space of a game. PC gaming's use of digital change also led to an increasingly open-ended distribution landscape, especially when players realized that *they* could participate in this process as well by creating and disseminating player-made modifications.⁴ Under the right circumstances, modders could then challenge the game industry's hegemonic control over the medium, not only by subverting a game's internal meaning but also by adding value to titles publishers may have otherwise abandoned.

This tension between the media industry and its audience lies at the foundation of new media studies, as scholars have researched how digital production and distribution can either open up a text to audience participation or obscure it through proprietary networks and dense layers of coding. As I argued in Chapter 1, the game console industry provides a revealing case study for this conflict given how consoles adopted network capabilities comparatively late,

⁴ Note: While both subscription economies and modding practices are important themes drawn from PC gaming industry precedents, the two tend not to work together with a few notable exceptions (e.g. *Second Life* (2003)). Instead, MMO's online communities have tended to resist modding as an intervention into the game developer's overall flow of updates and added content.

consolidating their efforts around networked platform launches in 2005 and 2006, and used black box technological frameworks to curtail meaningful modding activity. Once the consoles' point of departure was set, though, producers often followed PC gaming's example by providing additional content in the form of larger expansions (often branded as a "season pass", suggesting an explicit association with television). Even so, Microsoft and Sony also designed their networked consoles to tie individual games and their additional content to in-console marketplaces, a shift coinciding with the early use of the term DLC to emphasize a player's immediate access to a game's renewed commodification. As console developers continued to use digital marketplaces to expand on these titles, they established a system for selling smaller add-ons along with larger content expansions. These add-ons then worked to lightly augment a game's design in ways that explicitly mirrored PC modding practices established nearly a decade earlier, such as the use of cosmetic skins, new maps, and new items. Consequently, the console's use of DLC add-ons could co-opt the creative innovations of player modding at the same moment they stymied that participation itself, all while recontextualizing add-ons as discrete purchases.

Furthermore, as the game console industry learned from PC trends and refined them through closed digital networks, they also took cues from the newly thriving mobile game industry that emerged in the early 2000s, which expanded on the concept of add-ons by tying upgrades to game advancement. Specifically, mobile game producers frequently adopted the so-called 'freemium' business strategy which differentiates a player's investment between free and priced models for a particular title. Developers could then encourage gamers to opt into a priced service—either through subscription costs or microtransaction fees—to advance through a game more quickly or gain more assets and customization. Mobile developers further refined these

strategies by incorporating in-game economies that functioned with the same immediacy of a console marketplace only within the game itself. This business model proved inordinately lucrative, while also benefiting from the growing market for smartphones themselves, and has helped to solidify gaming's place as one of the most valuable media industries in the world. And naturally, as the console industry continued to develop their own digital business models alongside mobile gaming's meteoric rise, they incorporated many of these strategies into their designs as well.

For console producers, these convergent industry conditions inspired a glut of digital distribution trends residing beneath the banner term of “downloadable content” (or DLC). When game producers borrowed from these disparate paths in digital production, they did so looking for ways to repurpose their audience's desire to express themselves, advance in a game, and create communities within that game as something they could commodify—indeed, as a feature of the digital market. For this reason, I argue that the shift toward DLC distribution has both *intensified* and *transformed* the ways in the industry commodifies digital games themselves and the online gaming experience. DLC intensifies commodification both through the increasing scale at which the industry can integrate economic appeals into the game's broader systems and through the commodity's indefinite renewal through expansions. Meanwhile, DLC works to transform experience of playing online by commodifying expressivity through cosmetic skins, the temporalities of play (such as commodifying a player's impatience to progress in a game), or even the full range of access to material (which becomes quite persuasive if players can see others enjoying content that they have not bought into yet). Additionally, DLC production prompts us to consider issues surrounding a growing reliance on gambling mechanics and microtransaction models, the way expansions have changed development practices to encourage

large companies to rely even more on crunch labor for their rollout of digital expansions, and even how expansions can radically change the experience and internal narrative of a game. Beyond all these important concerns, I argue that the game industry's use of DLC has gradually evolved to replace a dependence on the console's marketplace to the game itself *as* the market and when the game expands it does so under the intense weight of commerce. As players experience the modern digital game, more and more often, they will be struck with the impression that their enjoyment is contingent on how much they spend—whether that involves buying into cosmetic skins to showcase individuality online, to play all the available maps with their friends on a popular first-person shooter, or to complete the entirety of a game that they have already invested a great deal of time into. The presence of a game's internal market is often embedded in the very fabric of gameplay itself and the call for a gamer's continued investment in that system is, at times, relentless.

Over the course of this chapter, I outline the history and stakes involved with this transition in console gaming and the ways that digital marketplaces and discrete add-on content altered industry imperatives and the surrounding gaming culture. First, I study how the PC industry's early adoption of the Internet provides a precedent for the console's closed network use of DLC distribution and the flexibility provided by digital expansions. From there, I study the first three years of the Xbox 360 and PlayStation 3 console generation, looking for patterns in the early use of DLC that helped to set a standard for the industry's push toward internal game markets, in-game economies, microtransactions, loot box mechanics, and several other innovations that remain prevalent today. After studying these historical precedents, I project forward to analyze the ways in which a broad proliferation of DLC and in-game economies have come to define the current gaming landscape. Finally, I finish the chapter with a brief analysis of

the game *NBA 2K18* (2017), its use of microtransactions, and the highly commoditized virtual environment of the game's first implementation of the 'MyNeighborhood' online space. In the process, I hope to not only highlight how the gaming industry slowly used digital add-ons to persistently reshape and repackage the video game commodity but, in the process, encouraged an increasingly limited form of engagement with gaming as a service that requires constant economic renewal.

Within this chapter, I hope to highlight both how gaming offers unique affordances as a cultural industry while still conforming to the broader shift in new media from finite, end-use texts toward the constant renewal and paradoxical precarity of contemporary digital media. In some ways, we could look to other media industries and see important parallels to the ways in which games have utilized digital markets. For example, products like Amazon's Kindle Reader or Apple's iPod worked to reorient a user's experience with literature or music as it theoretically expanded a personal library beyond the user's ability to fully enjoy all the media they own within their own lifetime, all while their digital markets constantly suggested new reading and listening material. Similarly, Apple's iTunes store established norms for breaking up albums into individual songs that could be commodified on their own. Digital media hardware and its platform-based online marketplaces could then use data driven algorithms that observed genre preferences and shopping history to create intensified and increasingly personalized patterns of consumption. On the other hand, most popular software programs have shifted from end-use final products to monthly subscription services and tiered pricing plans, while the advent of smartphones and tablets have led to more cross-connectivity between devices and a broadening sphere of online media. As Tim Jordan writes, "digital economic practices depend on the collective activities and communities of users, and have managed to insert profit-making into the

most intimate spaces of everyday life through these collective moments.”⁵ By studying the game industry, I hope to show just how embedded these economic appeals have become in the entire culture of gaming and the way producers currently design these titles to allow for constant economic renewal. In the process, the modern digital game may frame its expansions as rejuvenation but at a cost that fundamentally changes the experience of play.

Networked Gaming on PCs - The Precedent of Digital Expansions

Norms for PC game development emerged alongside the rapidly evolving technology of the personal computer and its use of network connectivity. At the start of the 1990s, modem functionality had distinct limitations not only with data access (connections capped around 56 kbit/s) but also with user cost for that access. At this point in history, users paid an hourly cost for the Internet alongside monthly subscription fees. A 1991 *Computer Gaming World* op-ed outlines how these metered fee structures impacted early experiments in online gaming, arguing that “one doesn’t feel the leisure to explore multiple options [in gameplay] when it is costing \$.10 a minute and up”.⁶ Game publishers even pushed advertisements suggesting how their audience could use hourly rates efficiently, such as a sponsored write-up for the space strategy game *Estarian Conquest* (1991) that stated it was “recommended that the player plan moves off-line to eliminate lengthy connect time charges.”⁷ Despite these challenges, developers pushed for advancements in online gaming even when online networks did not yet support a mass audience. These early efforts became tied to the growing industry of network connectivity itself as tech companies like America Online (AOL) and CompuServ experimented with closed videotex networks that tied PC users together through software and proprietary platforms, as opposed to

⁵ Tim Jordan, *The Digital Economy* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2020), 17.

⁶ Johnny L. Wilson, “On-line Gaming Viewed by a Skeptic,” *Computer Gaming World*, February 1991, 53.

⁷ Leah Wesolowski, “25-Player Overlord? *Estarian Conquest* On-Line,” *Computer Gaming World*, June 1991, 74.

open-ended Internet connections.⁸ Through these *walled garden* online platforms, videotex companies offered subscribers limited access to online shopping, online gaming, and chat services.⁹ And as the internet became fully privatized in 1995, videotex companies could pivot from a closed network service to offer full-fledged Internet access.

At the midpoint of the decade, the PC game market became saturated with internet providers¹⁰ offering exclusive online games to help them sell subscriptions.¹¹ AOL was especially primed to use gaming as a point of entry for their online platform, having initially started as a tech company called PlayNet that provided online game services for the Commodore 64. In 1991, AOL even co-developed and published the first “graphical” MMORPG *NeverWinter Nights* and hosted it on their platform at an additional fee of \$6.00 per month—a service they provided until 1996. Other platforms attempted to corner the market of different online game genres, such as videotex-turned-Internet provider GEnie hosting the largest online flight simulator on the market, which boasted “up to a hundred planes in the sky at once!”¹² Meanwhile, most platforms experimented with ways to incorporate limited online game functionality as well: gamers could download a title from a network and later upload scores to online leaderboards, they could download additional content such as new courses for a golfing game or an updated roster for a football game, or they could play turn-based strategy games that connected online at set intervals to chart player moves. Arguably, these early formations of

⁸ John Carey and Martin C.J. Elton, “The other path to the web: the forgotten role of videotex and other early online services. *New Media & Society* 11, no. 1-2 (2009): 241-260.

⁹ Janet Abbate, *Inventing the Internet* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1999), 203.

¹⁰ Note: these services included AOL, Compuserve, GEnie, Delphi, The ImagiNation, MPG-Net, NovaLink, Prodigy, and Total Entertainment Network and while there were several unique titles on offer, all these services typically filled out their catalogue with popular sports and gambling games.

¹¹ Scott Wolf, “The PC Gamer Guide to Online,” *PC Gamer*, February 1995, 61-66.

¹² *Ibid.* 63.

limited network connectivity would then set a precedent for the industry's use of add-on DLC content and even the staggered playtime mechanic popularized in mobile gaming.

By 1996, Internet access became more affordable in the US, spearheaded by CompuServ and AOL's competitive pricing models that offered unlimited dial-up connections for a monthly subscription. While CompuServ was the first company to provide this service, AOL quickly overshadowed their business rival through an aggressive advertising campaign wherein they mailed millions of AOL CD-ROMs to US households offering a free month of Internet. In turn, these broad shifts in the computer industry created the rapid audience growth that game developers had anticipated for years and they quickly worked to connect their products to online functionality. Developers increasingly hosted instructional manuals and small game patches online along with their early experiments with digital add-ons, while trade publications like *PC Gamer* and *PC Format* notified audiences about new online content available for games on the market. Without the deterrent of metered Internet fees, game producers pursued grand visions of online worlds for PC gaming, leading to the popularization of MMORPG titles that culminated with the production of *Ultima Online* (1997) and *EverQuest* (1999) at the decade's end.

While the game industry worked around the limitations of internet connectivity in the 1990s, they also benefited from new advancements of CD-ROM technology. The benefits of CD-ROMs were staggering when compared to industry standard floppy disk drives—CD-ROMs offered 660 megabytes (MB) of space compared to the paltry 1.44 MB of space of the 3.5 floppy disc—and software developers quickly shifted to developing games on CD-ROMS while waiting for computer hardware to catch up with the demand. In 1992, industry reports charted CD-ROM software sales at roughly 2,249,000 units shipped in the United States, while only 1.3 million of

the estimated 70 million PC users in the country even had a CD-ROM drive.¹³ A year later, CD-ROM sales ballooned to roughly eight million while its corresponding hardware disc drives became increasingly affordable as well. As consumer demand took shape, a *Los Angeles Times* report observed that “for investors and entrepreneurs who have held out hope the hype surrounding the multimedia discs would someday become reality, the numbers are proof the promise of CD-ROMs has finally arrived”.¹⁴ This technology then opened up new avenues for game production and distribution as developers not only developed more complex games and game expansions but also repackaged popular games as expanded CD-ROM versions they could sell anew to their audiences.

By 1994, enhanced CD-ROM games became so widespread that *PC Gamer* dedicated an article in their new column *Extended Play* to the “CD-ROM Revolution”. The author puts a glowing spin on the industry turn for repackaging previously released games, writing that:

[A] growing number of publishers, initially wary of CD-ROM, now realize that the little silver disks are the future of computer gaming. And so they're stepping up their CD-ROM releases, and doing a lot more than just shoveling old product into a new box.¹⁵

The author goes on to highlight Interplay’s *Star Trek: 25th Anniversary CD-ROM*—which featured new voice over work from series stars William Shatner, Leonard Nimoy, and others—and the re-released *SimCity CD-ROM*—which integrated a number of live-action videos into the game, “complete with a clip of a cheesy Toho monster thrashing a city.”¹⁶ Meanwhile, the

¹³ Stephen P. Klett Jr., “Low Prices Drive Sales Surge,” *Computer World*, Aug. 23, 1993, 51; Mark Alpert, “CD-ROM: The Next Computer Revolution,” *Fortune*, June 29, 1992.

https://archive.fortune.com/magazines/fortune/fortune_archive/1992/06/29/76592/index.htm.

¹⁴ Amy Harmon, “Sales of CD-ROM Soared at the End of 1993: Falling Prices for Computers, CD-ROM Drives Drove Holiday Software Sales,” *Los Angeles Times*, March 29, 1994, <https://www.latimes.com/archives/la-xpm-1994-03-29-fi-39690-story.html>

¹⁵ T. Liam McDonald, “Interplay Leads the CD-ROM Revolution,” *PC Gamer*, June 1994, 94.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*

broader column of *Extended Play* gave the publication space to discuss the sudden multitude of ways game producers used both CD-ROMs and internet access to distribute add-ons, updates and patches for their audience. Despite the praise of high-profile releases that worked to innovate on “old products”, the point remains that both network and technological affordances led the industry to consider not only how to make new games but also how to make old games new again.

As new digital distribution norms coalesced and developers used this opportunity to refashion previously released games, they also worked to develop new games around online subscription models and the staggered release of additional expansion packs. In this early history, MMORPGs offered fertile ground for experimentation and became the clearest showcase for what a virtual online gaming world could actually entail. In terms of game expansions, there were occasional precedents in early 1980s gaming such as Nihon Falcom’s experiments in expansions for the action RPG series *Dragon Slayer* (1984).¹⁷ Similarly, there were also examples of arcade cabinets being upgraded with new games, which were known as conversion kits.¹⁸ However, CD-ROMs offered a particularly useful mode of delivery for updating subscription-based games, since the Internet remained a less reliable option for large scale downloads well into the late 2000s. Moreover, expansions gave developers the ability to tie added content to the growing presence of online communities. For example, Blizzard marketed its popular expansion *World of Warcraft: The Lich King* (2008) by including a new area in the update solely dedicated to PvP (or: Player versus Player) combat.¹⁹ Likewise, in an advert for the

¹⁷ Note: We could also note a long tradition of iterative expansions for mixed-media board games, tabletop roleplaying games like *Dungeons and Dragons* (1974), and collectible card games.

¹⁸ Note: In fact, the original design of Shigeru Miyamoto’s famous *Donkey Kong* (1981) arcade game was actually a modded conversion kit that overwrote the far less popular *Radar Scope* (1980). See: Ken Horowitz, *Beyond Donkey Kong: A History of Nintendo Arcade Games* (Jefferson: McFarland & Company, Inc., Publishers, 2020).

¹⁹ “World of Warcraft: Wrath of the Lich King,” *PC Zone*, February 2008, 60.

Star Wars space fighter expansion *X-Wing vs. Tie Fighter: Balance of Power* (1997), the publisher framed the expansion around a fictional competition with Floyd from accounting, writing:

Oh, so you've beaten Floyd already? Well, while you've been basking in the glory of your last victory, Floyd's been picking up a few flying tips from the Empire *and* the Rebels. Because he has Balance of Power.²⁰

In these examples, game producers then incentivize game add-ons not only through the allure of new content but as a direct function of online competition.

With that said, the distribution norms in online gaming relied on far more than efforts to capitalize on friendly competition as game producers tied ideas of small expansions to a kind of user-based currency. As game producers sold users on the innovation of MMORPGs, they developed real-world parallels to consumerism through user-based bartering and virtual markets to reinforce that notion of an open-end digital world. For example, consider how an industry article showcased the breadth of MMO *Ultima Online*'s world by discussing interactivity as a form of virtual commerce:

Everything in the ULTIMA world is interactive. You can harvest wheat, take it to the mill, use the flour to make bread, and sell the bread. You can write a book and sell it to other players. You can learn a map-making skill, explore the ULTIMA world and sell your maps to other players.²¹

This revealing pitch for *Ultima* presents online gaming's potential for immersion as a function of user production and economic value well before the industry had settled on norms for how to

²⁰ "Add-On CD – Balance of Power," *Computer Gaming World*, January 1998, 117.

²¹ Dave Greely, "Has Origin Created the First True Online Game World?," *Game Developer*, August 19, 1997, https://www.gamasutra.com/view/feature/131628/has_origin_created_the_first_true_.php.

efficiently profit on added game content. As many scholars have noted, this early framework led to a surprising turn in online gaming where game products took on real world value as gamers mined for high level equipment, materials, and characters and sold them to other players through new online markets like eBay.²² With these growing trends in online gaming, add-on content could then simultaneously speak to the growing complexity of digital games while also suggesting a potential for constant commodification if game developers and publishers could harness the flow of production.

Finally, while norms around added digital content and online transactions continued to evolve, the constant flow of updates for online games likewise worked to change the culture around gaming to encourage constant engagement and added value for titles. Subscription-based games like MMOs could add in new areas, quests, and equipment to encourage gamers to log-in and complete new content, while the community formations around these games ensured players would have added motivation to not only return but continually opt into their monthly costs.²³ In other cases, new updates or expansions could even allow game developers to use the added revenue from smaller add-ons to help fund work on future projects and shore up lagging development timelines. In a discussion on the production history for *Age of Empires* (1997), designer Matthew Pritchard noted they used an expansion as a contingency for not meeting their deadline on the game's sequel. He further outlined the benefits of this decision by writing that "it would be a significant addition to the game, yet require only a small amount of our resources, and most importantly, it would be ready in time for Christmas 1998, taking the slot originally

²² For more, see: Edward Castranova, *Synthetic Worlds: The Business and Culture of Online Games* (Chicago, University of Chicago Press, 2005); Tim Jordan, "Virtual Economics and Twenty-First Century Leisure," *Fast Capitalism* 1, no. 2 (2005); Lisa Nakamura, "Don't Hate the Player, Hate the Game: The Racialization of Labor in World of Warcraft," *Critical Studies in Media Communication* 26, no. 2 (2009).

²³ For more on social dynamics in MMORPGs, see: Celia Pearce, *Communities of Play: Emergent Cultures in Multiplayer Games and Virtual Worlds* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 2009), Timothy Rowlands, *Video Game Worlds: Working at Play in the Culture of EverQuest* (London: Routledge, 2012).

planned for [the sequel]”.²⁴ As digital expansions offered these game producers more flexibility in distribution, we then see a dichotomy forming between the value they placed on added content and the amount of labor required to produce it, given the way developers can integrate new assets and designs into the preexisting framework of a game.

The early history of digital game distribution suggests a slow alignment between expansions, updates, and add-ons and the rhetoric of a game’s potentially limitless renewal. Online gaming and digital add-ons initially sold users on exclusive internet service providers and proprietary platforms or repackaged popular releases with enhanced CD-ROM editions. However, digital games ultimately moved from a dependency on broader services or novelty special releases to selling users on a self-contained game as a platform—the place in which users come to find a constant stream of new content, compete and socialize with friends online, customize their avatar, and so on. In the process of this change, developers applied far more control over a digital text after its release, while the text itself could remain in a commoditized state so long as players sought out new updates and expansions. Arjun Appadurai writes that commodities have a “*total* trajectory from production, through exchange/distribution, to consumption” and describes this process as a commodity situation in which an object can, at any point in its life cycle, transition into and out of a commoditized state (much like how used products can be sold again second-hand).²⁵ With digital games, though, the line between production, exchange/distribution, and consumption can blur and with each update a company alters the way a product is consumed and delivers a new experience of the commodity to its audience. Similarly, Stephen Kline, et al. observe that the video game industry “seeks to

²⁴ Matthew Pritchard, “Postmortem: Ensemble Studio’s Age of Empire’s II: Age of Kings,” *Game Developer*, March 7, 2000, https://www.gamasutra.com/view/feature/131844/postmortem_ensemble_studios_age_.php

²⁵ Arjun Appadurai, “Introduction: Commodities and the Politics of Value,” *The Social Life of Things: Commodities in Cultural Perspective*, ed. Arjun Appadurai (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1986), 13.

maintain continual expansion by generating a ceaseless stream of new commodities” and accelerates the timeline of this ‘stream’ through a post-Fordist standard of perpetual innovation.²⁶ And while the authors discussed this trend in relation to the rapid release of multiple software titles and consoles, we can see how the same industry logic applied to add-on releases for individual titles as well.

Within a short span of time, game producers found themselves at the frontier of a wide digital expanse. The ways in which developers and publishers sought to utilize these affordances, and the industry norms that formed around their strategies, can then give us meaningful insight into the underlying logic of digital expansions as a history and culture. Lisa Gitelman argues that early negotiations of use and the formation of protocols around newly available media create moments of transparency. In the case of early Internet history, she further writes that these formations of use “point gamely to a host of assumptions shared by users, and negotiated in the unceasing growth and variety of the network as a context for meaning and a medium of communication.”²⁷ However, we should note that in these early media histories producers will have the ability to initiate the terms for these norms and users’ potential assumptions for their use. In the case of game production, the early use of digital expansions split between smaller add-ons and updates and the broader use of subscription services and expansion packs. Consequently, the negotiation of digital distribution’s role in expanding a game belies a tension over what an expansion would mean for a game and how we should value these different add-ons. As we will see, the advent of networked game consoles would only exaggerate that tension

²⁶ Stephen Kline, Greig De Peuter, and Nick Dyer-Witheford, *Digital Play: The Interaction of Technology, Culture, and Marketing* (Québec City: McGill-Queen’s University Press, 2003), 66-67.

²⁷ Lisa Gitelman, *Always Already New: Media, History, and the Data of Culture* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 2006), 131.

as producers integrated game expansions alongside obfuscated progression mechanics and integrated gambling systems.

DLC Rising: Early Industry Patterns for Console Add-Ons

By 2006, Sony and Microsoft had released powerful consoles with online play and digital markets thoroughly integrated into their base designs. Unlike their PC counterparts, the PS3 and Xbox 360 could be tightly controlled through proprietary networks as players connected with others through console-based messaging services, purchased add-ons and new games through the console's marketplace, or launched online gameplay through a connection between Sony and Microsoft's internal network and a publisher's direct server. As discussed in Chapter 1, these changes toward a black box closed platform design fostered a divergent online gaming culture. Specifically, Sony and Microsoft's constant firmware updates for their consoles worked to curb the player's ability to hack the system or directly change a game's internal code. Consequently, PC gamers' robust modding practices could not easily translate to consoles. In my analysis on console modding and level creator games, I looked at the ways in which these changes limited how users could participate in gaming and deterred subversive outlets of player creativity. However, we can also view these changes in relation to PC's early precedent for expansion, as consoles offered an ideal platform for game producers to take firm control over the norms of digital production and distribution. Through streamlined console marketplaces and the advent of in-game economies, the norms around digital expansions consolidated around the blanket term DLC. In the following decade, the industry consistently pushed gaming toward a reliance on gambling models, microtransaction-based progression mechanics, and a host of other predatory market practices.

To better understand the gaming console's integration of DLC, though, we should look at the early implementation of digital add-ons in closer detail. To study these initial changes, I charted the first three calendar years of game releases for the Xbox 360 (2005-2007) and the first two calendar years for the PlayStation 3 (2006-2007) as a large data set (see Appendix A and B). In this set, I grouped each game by date of release, whether or not a title distributed DLC, whether the title was released as a traditional retail physical copy or as a digital exclusive from the console's marketplace, and the title's genre. Once these parameters were set, I focused further on the games that incorporated DLC and noted when the DLC was published, how many add-ons were released, the nature of the digital content (e.g. new maps, new characters, larger game expansions), and if the DLC was released for free or sold for an additional cost. Studying these different elements then allowed me to make several intriguing observations for the evolving use of DLC, the industry's attempts to establish the value for digital add-ons, and the way that value began to change how games were packaged and sold to audiences.

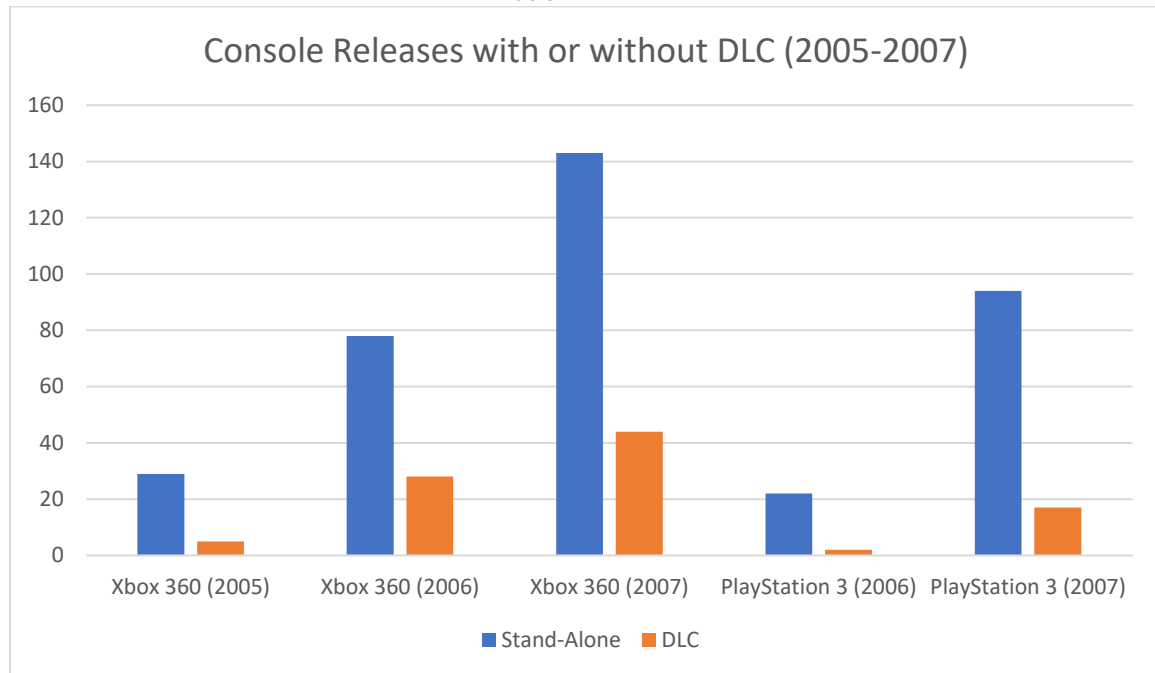
To begin with, game producers on both consoles were slow to incorporate DLC add-ons into their overall development strategy but as time goes on, games on the Xbox 360 show a stronger inclination toward experimenting with this mode of production. In the truncated holiday season for 2005, the Xbox 360 featured 34 games, five of which published DLC in the online marketplace. In 2006, their catalog grew to 103 games and had 28 games publish DLC add-ons. Finally, in 2007 the Xbox's catalog featured 187 games and had 44 release additional DLC. Overall, these digitally expanded titles would average roughly a quarter of the console's catalog for the full year runs in 2006 and 2007.²⁸ Comparatively, PlayStation 3 titles incorporated DLC less often. In the truncated 2006 catalog, the platform featured 22 games and only two of which

²⁸Note: this also does not account for the fact that a significant portion of the catalog is taken up by retro arcade re-releases like *Joust* that were typically straight-forward low-priced ports without add-ons.

featured DLC. In the 2007 catalog, the platform featured 111 games and had 17 publish DLC (Table 1). Curiously, there were also sixteen games that were released for both consoles during this period but had, for one reason or another, only released DLC on the Xbox 360's marketplace. In some cases, the discrepancy appears attributable to staggered release windows—for example, a game may have been released first on the PlayStation 3 without DLC but then would feature DLC on the Xbox 360 to help incentivize players to purchase a perceived “older” game. In the first few years of the console's run, Microsoft also released a handful of Xbox 360 exclusive special editions of games that incorporated DLC to either help reinvigorate the value of the release (much like the enhanced CD-ROMs discussed in the previous section) or to sell the release at higher premium at launch. On the other hand, the disparity between consoles may also have to do with how Microsoft branded the Xbox 360 as a platform for online multiplayer gaming and had a full year of separation from Sony's launch to develop an online community. With that said, these early moments of separation for online content on different consoles would eventually collapse as the broader trends in development increasingly favored DLC content distribution in the years following.²⁹

²⁹ Note: As mentioned in the introduction, the Nintendo Wii's console stands out in this generation as being particularly disinterested in incorporating DLC, though as I mentioned the console's low hard drive capacity would likely influence that broader disparity in development practices for the console. It's also worth considering that the Microsoft company would also have clear insight into PC gaming's own history of selling expansions and may have been particularly attuned to making this shift based on that history.

Table 1



As the console's market practices slowly took shape, the industry use of the term DLC emerged as game producers had already begun to experiment with the console's digital affordances. In my research on trade press articles, I first noticed the use of the term in 2006 with the Xbox 360-exclusive *Project Gotham Racing 3* (2005) and its DLC "Speed Pack" that sold gamers twelve new cars for the price of 400 Microsoft points (or: 5 USD). However, a handful of other games had already used the online market to distribute added content including the console's first DLC-enabled titles *Kameo: Elements of Power* (2005)—an action-adventure game which released add-ons for a new co-op mode and character skins—and *Outpost Kaloki X* (2005)—a sci-fi strategy game that released add-ons for new levels. Additionally, both *Kameo* and *Outpost* used a common strategy in the early years of console DLC pricing wherein they first distributed free DLC and *later* added in more DLC for a nominal fee. In these early forays into the console's use of digital add-ons, then, they were already formulating strategies around free

enticements for additional paid content well before the mobile industry would help formalize these practices with the now-infamous freemium business model.

In addition to smaller add-ons, console games also attempted to integrate larger DLC expansions into their development workflow and leveraged those releases to extend the shelf-life of popular games. In some cases, these were literal parallels to PC expansions—for instance, Bethesda released expansion packs for the PC version of *The Elder Scrolls IV: Oblivion* and then reframed these identical expansions as DLC for the console versions of their game. In other cases, popular titles like *Halo 3* (2007) used DLC to maintain online interest for the game over the course of years, releasing new DLC map packs in 2007, 2008, 2009, and 2010. I also noticed DLC used more often with exclusive titles, as publishers could further emphasize the game's visibility on the console by releasing add-ons that extended gameplay. To this point, even though the PlayStation 3's overall catalog showed a lower overall commitment to publishing DLC, many of the games that did so were Sony-exclusives including *Resistance: Fall of Man* (2006), *flOw* (2007), *MotorStorm* (2007), and *Folklore* (2007). So, while DLC may not have dominated the early development stage of the networked console era, its burgeoning use not only showcased a depth of flexibility but also tantalizing market potential for any game producer able to formalize a system around that use.

In this sample of releases, we can also see an emergent logic on the kinds of games producers favored for post-release development strategies. After accounting for repeated entries on individual titles that were released for both consoles, I counted 89 different games that distributed DLC between 2005 and 2007. Within this segment, I narrowed down each title's dominant genre and ultimately segmented the titles within a graph that highlighted whether a game primarily acted as action-adventure, shooter, role-playing (or: RPG), strategy, racing,

puzzle, platformer, fighter, sports, music, or simply miscellaneous if the title did not conform to a clear, dominant genre.³⁰ Within these designations, I found two genres that stood out as a particularly popular choice to receive add-on content: action-adventure titles and first- and third-person shooters. In the case of action-adventure titles, the trend seems partly due to how broadly the genre can be applied to games of the period. Indeed, many of the action-adventure titles have third-person shooter elements like *The Godfather* (2006), *Kane & Lynch: Dead Men* (2006), or *Crackdown* (2007) and this genre makes for a fitting match with popular licensed content like *Marvel: Ultimate Alliance* (2006), *Spider-Man 3* (2007), and *Transformers: The Game* (2007), which sold gamers on showcasing familiar characters within frenetic, action-packed levels. Moreover, these games often utilized the sandbox open-world design popularized by Rockstar's *Grand Theft Auto* series in the previous console generation and could use add-ons to give players a reason to continue inhabiting these larger virtual worlds whether that involved new playable characters like *Spider-Man 3*'s Green Goblin DLC or new game assets as with *Crackdown*'s "Gettin' Busy" bonus pack that sold users new weapons and vehicles (Figure 2). With that said, DLC for these action titles were often lower priced and largely offered minimal changes to gameplay. In comparison, the use of DLC in conjunction with the online play for first- and third-person shooters offered a more dedicated approach toward extended engagement in these titles.

³⁰ Note: an example of a perplexing genre case would be *Dead or Alive Xtreme 2* (2006), which operates somewhere between a volleyball simulator, a superficial dating game, and a collection of other mini-games.

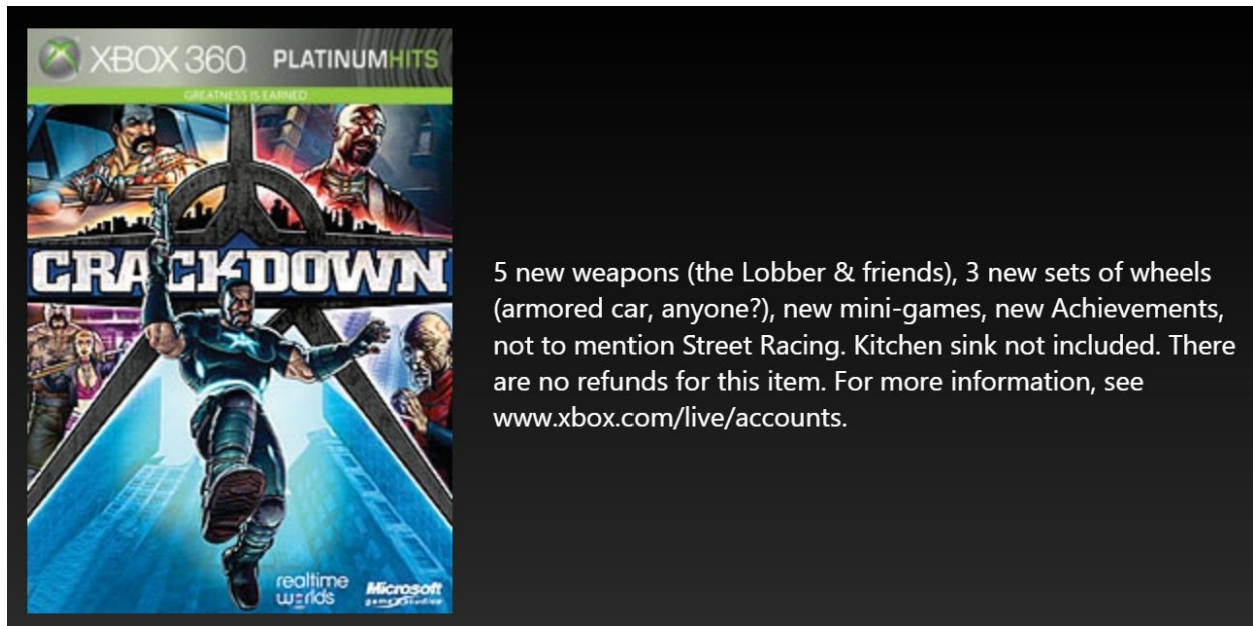


Figure 2

In contrast to the broad influence of action-adventure titles in this early console era, online shooters stand out as one of the first console genres to feature a consistent and prolonged development strategy after release. As mentioned earlier, *Halo 3* had a particularly robust DLC release schedule which worked to reinvigorate interest in the game by releasing new maps for online gameplay each year. However, Bungie was not alone in this specific use of DLC as games like *Gears of War*, *Call of Duty 3* (2006), *Tom Clancy's Rainbow Six Vegas* (2006), and *Call of Duty 4: Modern Warfare* (2007) all released new map packs several months after the initial game was published, which exclusively worked to bolster online play. With online shooters, then, we see game producers make the clearest connections between expansions and community engagement as the violent, male-dominated shooter genre apparently stood out as the clearest community to foster online engagement in the console generation. In the process of extending online play through new maps, DLC could mirror the value previously afforded to the PC game industry through modding communities. In Hector Postigo's analysis of modding communities, the author notes how mods could extend the life of a game beyond a simple calculus of sales by

also encouraging a complex engagement of fandom wherein discourse on new mod add-ons offered yet another avenue through which fans could discuss the game and cultivate their shared interests.³¹ However, with the prolonged engagement of the console's online play, game producers can directly work to shape community engagement and further commodify this relationship by putting a price on the ability to renew a game's world.

Looking at this early history, we can extrapolate on the way industry producers work to establish value for renewed engagement for a game and how they might position themselves within the creation of fan engagement and online sociality. Most importantly, we can see the imperfect ways in which different companies worked to establish a market within a game itself, establishing a precedent for the intense commodification of in-game markets, currencies, and microtransaction systems. Even so, the industry's attempts to formalize intuitive in-game markets took time and there were several revealing experimentations on incorporating this content within the structure of game. For example, Electronic Arts' *The Godfather* (2006) was one of the first console titles to include game currency as a DLC add-on but gave some of it away for free and sold the rest of it as a large lump sum that could only be purchased once (whereas later in-game market systems would work to repeatedly price users into a game's economy). Meanwhile, Bethesda's *Oblivion* once again offered an important early case study as it not only repackaged PC expansions as DLC but attempted to work out an early system for microtransactions, leading to the by-now notorious decision to sell gamers on gold plated horse armor for 200 Microsoft points (or: 2.50 USD).

As Bethesda's horse armor add-on became a full-blown controversy with both players and game journalists balking at the price tag for sprucing up their beloved steed, Bethesda's PR

³¹ Hector Postigo, "Of Mods and Modders: Chasing Down the Value of Fan-based Digital Game Modifications," *Games and Culture* 2, no. 4 (2007): 302.

department put out a press release to frame the DLC as an experiment in finding the potential value and demand for add-ons and emphasized that this was an *optional* feature.³² However, that response neglected to account for the fact that Bethesda's experiment also marked a larger shift in business practices, as the company had released additional content for their previous title *The Elder Scrolls III: Morrowind* for free. In this case, gamers seemed not only incensed at the game's high mark-up just to decorate their horse but also that their experimentation in finding a cost-threshold for DLC was seen as leading the way toward a larger industry change. In an interview taken almost a decade after this controversy, Bethesda's lead designer Joel Burgess defended the game's maligned add-on and put this decision within the historical context of developing new market strategies for DLC:

Back in 2005, developers were wondering, well, what does DLC even mean? How do we make it? [...] We didn't even know what we should charge. [...] We needed something [...] that would test the pipeline and just sort of feel out the market for what was the best thing we could possibly do. So what we came up with was horse armor.³³

However, the important distinction with this DLC was not whether gold-plated horse armor was *worth* a couple dollars but that the console's priced cosmetic upgrades particularly stood in contrast to similar add-ons distributed for free by modding communities on the PC's version of *Oblivion*. The console's gilded add-on then manifested as a harbinger for what expansion would ultimately entail for a new generation of console gaming.

While game companies like Bethesda stumbled out of the gate to gauge DLC's value and to acculturate players toward its inclusion in newer game launches, other contemporary efforts

³² J. Ransom-Wiley, "Bethesda Responds to Oblivion Backlash," *endgadget*, April 4, 2006, <https://www.engadget.com/2006-04-04-bethesda-responds-to-oblivion-backlash.html>

³³ Charlie Hall, "Oblivion Dev is Sorry, Not Sorry for Horse Armor," *Polygon*, March 4, 2015, <https://www.polygon.com/2015/3/4/8148565/dlc-horse-armor-elder-scrolls-oblivion-mod>.

proved DLC's potential for added revenue so long as developers could strike the right balance between a game's base design and the purchase of smaller add-ons. In particular, Harmonix's dual music franchises *Rock Band* and *Guitar Hero* offered a catalyst for a dedicated publishing strategy around add-ons. For example, over the first year of *Rock Band*'s (2007) release, developer Harmonix reported that players had downloaded over twenty-eight million songs from both the PlayStation Network and XBLA console markets.³⁴ In 2009, Harmonix likewise announced the studio's *Guitar Hero* sister franchise had recorded over \$2 Billion in sales, buoyed in part by 40 million DLC song downloads over the franchise's lifespan.³⁵ Appropriately, *Rock Band* and *Guitar Hero III* stand well above any of the game titles in my data set in terms of sheer volume of add-ons sold as both titles number over a thousand add-ons in their library released across the near-span of a decade. Moreover, I believe Harmonix's success in monetizing DLC add-ons is partly due to the way the game mirrors a preexisting and proven digital distribution model: namely, Apple's lucrative efforts to sell individual songs for 99 cents through the iTunes digital marketplace starting in 2003. As Jeremy Morris argues, the iTunes digital market offered a formative effort to not only establish the value of the digital music commodity but also to create an online environment that could encourage that frame of reference as the iTunes player's shared interface worked to "dissolve the barriers between the personal collection and the retailer."³⁶ Video games like *Rock Band* and *Guitar Hero* could then innovate on that base model by tying its shared interface to social gameplay and competition, incentivizing added purchases for the game's peripheral instruments, and giving away some DLC songs for free to

³⁴ Eric Caoili, "Rock Band Reaches 28 Million Song Downloads," *Game Developer*, December 10, 2008, <https://www.gamedeveloper.com/console/-i-rock-band-i-reaches-28>.

³⁵ Simon Carless, "Kotick: *Guitar Hero* Now \$2 Billion Franchise," *Game Developer*, May 8, 2009, <https://www.gamedeveloper.com/pc/kotick-i-guitar-hero-i-now-2-billion-franchise>.

³⁶ Jeremy Morris, *Selling Digital Music, Formatting Culture* (Oakland: University of California Press, 2015), 133.

create the precedent for expanding on a game's library. As a result, these games became industry trendsetters, signaling the potential for an expanding digital gaming experience where each new wave of DLC expansions—such as high-profile licensing deals with Metallica, The Beatles, and Aerosmith—could draw players back to these respective franchises.

As game producers worked to formalize the mechanics for in-game economies, industry insiders frequently acknowledged that this moment in history marked a transition between an emphasis on hardware to one of software and the market potential of the expanded game. In 2005, *Game Developer* featured a roundtable discussion with developers on digital distribution and each participant spoke of its inevitability in some form. One writer opined that “as more and more gamers have the Internet bandwidth to download large game files [...] the idea and potential of buying add-ons will sustain the game beyond the traditional play period”, while another noted that the new Xbox 360 and PlayStation 3 would create “unified portals” that “makes a very persuasive argument for a significant digital shift on the console side of the equation.”³⁷ A few years later in 2007, Sony Worldwide Studios' Phil Harrison gave a keynote speech at the game developers conference and stated:

It's all about software now, it's not about hardware. It's all about services, it's about the way the industry is changing and the way we hope to be taking a leadership position in that change.³⁸

And so, even as the game developers and publishers struggled to formalize distinct systems in which users would engage with a game's persistent expansion, there was a growing sense that the ability for digital games to tie gameplay with a transactional system had yet to reach its full

³⁷ Quang Hong, “Question of the Week Responses: Digital Game Distribution,” *Game Developer*, June 20, 2005, https://www.gamasutra.com/view/feature/130743/question_of_the_week_responses_.php

³⁸ Phil Harrison, quoted by Robert Purchase, “GDC: Harrison Renews Focus,” *EuroGamer*, March 9, 2007, <https://www.eurogamer.net/gdc-harrison-renews-focus>.

market potential. Furthermore, using the ‘unified portal’ of a game console offered producers leverage to streamline these purchases and create the context for new norms of online gameplay without the distractions and potential for piracy that comes from an open-ended Internet connection.

Reading the Past and Future(s) of the Digital Game

Looking through the history of PC gaming’s use of expansions and the Xbox 360 and PlayStation 3 consoles’ incorporation of DLC, the flexibility and market potential afforded by an emergent digital distribution model cannot be overstated. As the PC gaming industry explored ways to enfold the use of the Internet with a preexisting gaming culture, they used these expansions to renew a game’s value, to create new forms of player engagement and broader visions of virtual worlds (complete with robust virtual economies), and frequently tied online competition to the sale of add-on content. Meanwhile, the console generation that emerged more than a decade later streamlined many of these principles while beginning to innovate complex designs of in-game economies and forms of low-cost content that could build on the precedent of PC modding and the online facsimiles of markets found most routinely in MMORPGs. In the process of making these changes, the console industry stood at the precipice of a broader shift happening in the cultural industries and worked to codify new norms around digital distribution.

Within the intervening years between the launch of fully networked consoles in 2005 and 2006 and the present of digital gaming, players have witnessed a constant encroachment of DLC distribution norms to contend with. Publishers use the lure of “free” DLC to help motivate presales and create special “game of the year” and enhanced editions of games with packaged DLC to help either sell an old title anew and reinvigorate its market values or sell multiple versions of games at launch with tiered price points (Figure 3 and 4). In other cases, new games

included exclusive digital codes for discounts on a “Season Pass” of future DLC, enfolding users into a game’s potential expansion at the point of purchase. In many of these cases, enhanced versions of new games could also undercut the used game market and reframe the value of add-ons as an investment in a game’s future experience. The digital expansion of gaming would then support an underlying industry logic wherein the value of a game is found in the breadth of its additional offerings and its alignment to a service model, confronting the expectations that a game would already include all it needed to based on its initial asking price.



Figure 3



Figure 4

While the gaming industry's use of online distribution evolved and networked technology became more commonplace, audiences were forced to resolve disparate production contexts as the industry moved through its digital transition. In David Nieborg's study on early DLC market strategies, he refers to this content as a form of *branched serialization* "designed to extend the primary physically distributed disc-based copy"³⁹ and notes how the initial use of digital expansions were subordinate to the primary release of games in retail stores. James Newman makes a related argument that the industry's use of pre-order DLC exclusives encourages players to accept a culture of forced obsolescence in gaming through the enticement of the new and unrealized, as players "participate in the future of gaming and through which the pleasures of 'old' games are effectively eroded."⁴⁰ Meanwhile, Aphra Kerr argues that the gaming as service model constitutes an expansion of production logics "reliant on the continuous, dynamic and almost real-time flow of data between users, intermediaries, content creators and other parties to support both indirect and direct forms of monetisation and customisation."⁴¹ In these studies, DLC could symbolize a larger transition between physical and digital media and a way for game producers to frame that media as a constant enticement for players. With that said, to make the most out of digital gaming's persistent allure, producers focused most persistently on in-game market designs and spearheaded efforts to commoditize game progression and cosmetic expression.

While DLC has taken on numerous market strategies, many game producers have favored a slow push toward in-game economy structures frequently tied with low-end microtransaction

³⁹ David B. Nieborg, "Prolonging the Magic: The Political Economy of the 7th Generation Console Game," *Eludamos: Journal for Computer Game Culture* 8, no. 1 (2014): 55.

⁴⁰ James Newman, *Best Before: Videogames, Supersession and Obsolescence* (London: Routledge, 2012), 73.

⁴¹ Aphra Kerr, *Global Games: Production, Circulation and Policy in the Networked Era* (London: Routledge, 2017), 69.

purchases that encourage constant player investment in a game. Consider once more the minimal price points for many of the early console DLC content: Bethesda sold gold-plated horse armor for 2.50 USD, Harmonix sold new *Rock Band* music tracks for 1.99 USD a song, and Bizarre Creations sold new cars in *Project Gotham Racing 3* for 5 USD. As already noted, these prototypical add-ons could be differentiated from larger expansions and required relatively minor updates to a game's overall design. Meanwhile, developers and publishers worked to acculturate players to accept modest charges as the value point for extending the game in small ways.

However, Ryan Lizardi aptly points out a larger scale at work with these consumption patterns:

What the DLC model does is create a cycle in which users are given the choice to purchase just a "small" addition to enhance a game they enjoy, but adding all of the transactions highlights that there is nothing small about the investment into a single game.⁴²

To help perpetuate that cycle of small purchases, console games slowly adopted the same kind of internal markets that MMORPGs had used to powerful effect in PC gaming, only mapped onto a number of other genres and connected directly through a consolidated console marketplace. In-game currencies could then act to further obscure and downplay player investment in a game, particularly when players could also earn game currency through both gameplay *and* their own monetary investment. In these later incarnations of console DLC, the seemingly modest value proposition of microtransaction purchases fueled an overhaul in industry game design wherein add-ons could maximize a game's profit through their incremental, and potentially limitless, expansion.

⁴² Ryan Lizardi, "DLC: Perpetual Commodification of the Video Game," *Democratic Communiqué* 25, no. 1 (2012): 37.

When considering larger critiques on microtransaction systems in gaming, authors have typically focused on either the ways that producers tie microtransactions to gaming progression systems or to chance-based gambling mechanics like randomized loot boxes. Casey B. Hart emphasizes the developer's control over a player's experience of a game, writing that they "create environments that lend themselves to consumer behavior governed by psychological or emotional motivations rather than pure logic."⁴³ He goes on to tie these in-game systems to affective appeals on sunk cost biases, impulse buying, or limited instant gratification—all of which can be tied to the ways that players progress through a game and enjoy advanced levels. Meanwhile, Mark Johnson and Tom Brock detail a *gambling turn* in game monetization, focusing largely on microtransaction systems that favor "chance-based microtransactions and thus encourage many more purchases from players in pursuit of their desired items."⁴⁴ In particular, the industry has used randomized loot boxes that offer players new items, characters, and costumes—often with opaque and extreme odds for rare items—to incentivize repeat investments while drawing considerable ire from both players and regulatory bodies.⁴⁵ In either case, the industry can use an entrenched in-game economy to create underlying reinforcement for players to feed real capital into a game's virtual economy.

At this point in game development history, it also becomes difficult to draw a neat line between console and mobile development strategies. Not incidentally, both industries experimented with developing online gaming functionality around the same time as smart phone technology similarly rose to prominence in the mid-2000s, arguably culminating with Apple's

⁴³ Casey B. Hart, "Free-to-Play? Considering the Interaction of Functional Factors in Video Game Design Influencing the Economic Effectiveness of Microtransactions," *The Evolution and Social Impact of Video Game Economics*, ed. Casey B. Hart (Lanham: Lexington Books, 2017): 69.

⁴⁴ Mark Johnson and Tom Brock, "The 'Gambling Turn' In Digital Game Monetization," *Journal of Gaming and Virtual Worlds* 12, no. 2 (2020): 148.

⁴⁵ Danielle Partis, "18 Countries Back Report Calling for Loot Box Regulations," *gamindustry.biz*, June 1, 2022, <https://www.gamesindustry.biz/articles/2022-06-01-18-countries-back-report-calling-for-loot-box-regulations>.

release of the first-generation iPhone in 2007. In earlier iterations of the mobile game industry, developers and publishers contended with early prohibitive data costs, which stymied efforts to connect games to a consistent online network (similar to how the metered Internet costs impacted early PC gaming). However, as mobile technology improved and cellular service providers increasingly marketed unlimited data plans, the mobile game industry boomed. This sudden influx of mobile game apps then aligned with a larger *casual revolution* in gaming, wherein game producers increasingly appealed to a broader demographic of players with more accessible titles.⁴⁶ With mobile gaming in particular, ‘casual’ titles often used some variation on a freemium monetization strategy, which offered players a game at no upfront cost and then incentivized them to either buy into a premium version of the game or make incremental payments for in-game economies that enabled easier progress.⁴⁷ The broad appeal of casual play and the subtle reinforcement for microtransaction buy-ins to enjoy a game further then led to many high-profile mobile titles making unprecedented profits.⁴⁸ This industry growth overlapped with the console industry co-developing their own digital distribution strategies alongside and, unsurprisingly, console producers adopted many of the same strategies to increase their profits. However, console producers would often graft in-game economies, microtransaction systems, and loot boxes onto expensive game productions that were then sold to users at a premium cost, negating the entire lure of mobile’s free initial buy-in and frequently courting controversy with their players.

⁴⁶ Jesper Juul, *A Casual Revolution: Reinventing Video Games and Their Players* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 2010).

⁴⁷ David Nieborg, “From Premium to Freemium: The Political Economy of the App,” *Social, Casual and Mobile Games: The Changing Gaming Landscape*, eds. T. Leaver and M. Willson (London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2016).

⁴⁸ Note: According to a consumer report on *Statista*, in 2020 mobile games accounted for over fifty percent of the video game revenue world wide. The report further states “as mobile penetration rates and smartphone usage continue to accelerate on a global scale, mobile games revenue is on track to surpass the 100 billion-dollar-mark by 2023.” See: J. Clement, “Mobile Gaming Market in the U.S. - Statistics and Facts,” *Statista*, November 12, 2021, <https://www.statista.com/topics/1906/mobile-gaming/#dossierKeyfigures>.

At the core of this transition toward a systemized use of digital add-ons, a tension lies particularly in the way the console industry had to acculturate players to an entirely new context of gaming. In the mobile industry, freemium monetization and casual play were built into the platform's emergence and so there were no preconceived notions about how these games should be sold to an audience. The console industry, on the other hand, had a long history of gaming in isolation from an online market. Not surprisingly, then, many of the more expansive incorporations of early DLC were coordinated with games that heavily featured online play, helping to set a precedent for the value of digital expansion. Still, looking through the first few years of console DLC, there's clearly an increasing interest for companies to experiment with these kinds of in-game expansions, experiment with finding their potential value for players, and building that content production into the development workflow. Meanwhile, a larger push in business research has not only touted the digital market's ability to expand on products but frequently frames this relationship between a product and its continued service as essential in the production of digital goods. As one article succinctly puts it: "adding complementary goods and services to core products has the potential to strengthen business models, whereas failure to do so may result in a subsequent failure of core products."⁴⁹ In other words, expand your product beyond its initial release and reception or face failure in a market that seeks to fully adopt digital service models.

While game developers rely on a digital service model to sustain a game's renewal and fine tune the play experience, they likewise benefit from creating distinct social spaces. As detailed in the chapter's opening example on *Fortnite*, online gaming has a great potential to take on communal characteristics—particularly as voice chat features allow players to talk during

⁴⁹ Thierry Rayna and Ludmilla Striukova, "'Few to Many': Change of Business Model Paradigm in the Video Game Industry," *Digiworld Economic Journal*, no. 94 (2014): 73

their online matchmaking as if they were carrying on a phone conversation. As Celia Pearce writes on online gaming, “networks amplify the scale, progression, and geographical reach of play communities, allowing them to grow much larger much faster than their offline counterparts.”⁵⁰ However, while the author largely focuses on the practical benefits of networked play, I would argue a game’s online platform and use of digital economies can have a stark influence on the context of that play, even to the point of requiring a player’s buy-in to fully participate in gameplay or access the full range of player expressivity. For example, when Electronic Arts released the online first-person shooter *Star Wars Battlefront* (2015) they sold the game with an ‘optional’ 50 USD season pass that would add new maps for online play throughout the year, but while you could theoretically opt out of the game’s renewal you wouldn’t be able to participate in matchmaking with friends online if they had bought the additional DLC. This decision splintered the game’s community between players who had invested in *Battlefront*’s season pass and those who bought the game on the assumption that they bought the entire game.⁵¹ Consequently, while networks may extend the reach of play communities they do not necessarily do so evenly.

Online games can also harness the social characteristics of play by commodifying changes in a player’s avatar through cosmetic skin add-ons, emotes, and new equipment. As Adrienne Shaw argues, while players may not think of their avatars as a direct depiction of their own identities, in online gaming “the avatar is, in the most direct way, a representative for the player in a social space.”⁵² In fact, Shaw makes a larger point that the malleability of the game

⁵⁰ Pearce (2009), 3.

⁵¹ Erik Kain, “EA Goes Full Dark Side With \$50 ‘Star Wars: Battlefront’ Season Pass,” October 12, 2015, <https://www.forbes.com/sites/erikkain/2015/10/12/ea-goes-full-dark-side-with-star-wars-battlefront-50-season-pass/?sh=3fcf25d235e3>.

⁵² Adrienne Shaw, *Gaming at the Edge: Sexuality and Gender at the Margins of Gamer Culture* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2014), 122.

avatar offers players a uniquely freeing ability to play with notions of their own identity. When game producers commodify the full range of that expressivity, they then recontextualize that freedom as a feature of the market and even a symbol of status in the online gaming world.

These changes in the larger culture of online expression can also be exaggerated in part because of the amplification of networked play. As mentioned in Chapter 1, online industries often use a platform's larger community as a way of reinforcing its own networked effects, as user's buy into a digital market in part because they see others using the platform doing so as well.⁵³

Moreover, when the gaming world ties these purchases to the larger experience of online play, they arguably use the context of the player's enjoyment with the game as a justification of the add-on's value. To be fair, these expansions to online games often *do* add value to the player's gaming experience but that value needs to be considered within the larger context of the digital game's persistent efforts to constantly reinforce play and the gaming environment as a fixture of commerce. Miguel Sicart writes that "because play has been traditionally argued as being a voluntary activity based on a voluntary acceptance of rules, instrumentalizing play for the complicity with capital makes it feel like a voluntary action, like a choice where there was no choice."⁵⁴ While I think this account undercuts the player's agency in this situation, the idea of play reinforcing capitalist logics is a valuable framework to consider, especially when the social dynamics surrounding that play can create an 'insider' and 'outsider' split between those who invest in the game's expansion and those who do not. In that case, the seeming lack of choice involved may be less an overly prescribed feature of capitalism than a social construction that the game's digital market helps to structure.

⁵³ David P. McIntyre and Mohan Subramaniam, "Strategy in Network Industries: A Review and Research Agenda," *Journal of Management* 35, no.6 (2009).

⁵⁴ Miguel Sicart, "Playful Capitalism, or Play as an Instrument of Capitalism," *Contracampo: Brazilian Journal of Communication* 40, no.2 (2021): 6.

Looking through these changes in game production, it becomes increasingly clear how the evolving digital game offers players a paradox of conditional expansion. These games constantly declare their renewal to their audience and offer the promise of an evolving experience to keep the game relevant in the player's eyes. But as the game expands, it does so while tied to commercial mechanisms that ask for players to constantly buy into a game's renewal as well. Taken only this far, this proposal seems like a reasonable thing for game producers to ask of their audience. After all, they produced more content and have worked to add details into a game's experience and are explicitly tying a market value to those changes. However, the problem lies with the ways in which gameplay itself and the game's environment have been designed to feed into that constant economic draw and how this shift in commodified gameplay changes the entire culture around gaming. To explore exactly how these changes work on a granular level and how the sociality of gaming has become fundamentally commercialized, I look to analyze *NBA 2K18*'s inaugural use of the 'MyNeighborhood' game mode and explore how this virtual space is bound to a pernicious and opaque virtual economy.

Analyzing *NBA 2K18*'s 'MyNeighborhood' and 'MyCAREER' Mode

When Visual Concepts and Take-Two released *NBA 2K18* for the 2017 fall holiday season, they faced immediate backlash from fans and game journalists over their overhauled microtransaction system. The series had first established a norm for microtransactions in *NBA 2K13*'s (2012) MyCareer mode, which allowed users to create their own NBA avatar and progress from an untested rookie in the league to a star. Users earned virtual currency (or VC) for each game they played and used that currency to upgrade their avatar's overall skill along with purchasing dunk animations, pre-game routines, and so on. Meanwhile, if players grew tired of the game's overall grind to upgrade their avatars they could spend actual money on the game's

virtual currency to accelerate the process. Within this base set-up, the popular console series repurposed freemium monetization strategies for their high-profile release while containing that change to an isolated game mode that could be designed entirely around incentives to buy into the game's VC. With that said, *NBA 2K*'s initial in-game economy framework changed drastically with *2K18*'s release, which not only slowed the 'MyCAREER' progression system to a crawl but also featured a pointedly urban, online social space called 'MyNeighborhood' built around VC-based vendors for cosmetic upgrades like shoes, clothing, or haircuts.

More importantly, the neighborhood works as the game mode's main hub for users to play with others online through 'street ball' matches, continue their avatar's career mode, or participate in team practices that could (slowly) increase the player's skill upgrade thresholds. In other words, the game requires users to move through its highly commodified social environment to access MyCAREER mode's different features. In the game's neighborhood, users *have* to spend VC in order to improve their characters, modify their appearances, play against other online opponents in literal gambling matches where they wager a set amount of their virtual currency, or simply exist within the highly commoditized virtual space. Meanwhile, the game's neighborhood was populated by users who had already seemingly bought in and the game makes a pointed effort to outline other players' skill levels and show off their customized cosmetic upgrades.

The *NBA 2K*'s developers foreground the importance of this economic model by making users create a MyPLAYER account as their first required interaction with the game. As soon as users open the *NBA 2K18* program, the interface prompts them with this this message:

Start off by creating your very own MyPLAYER! This is an important part of your NBA 2K18 experience, as your MyPLAYER will represent you in places like MyCAREER, MyGM, The Park, and 2K Pro-Am. (Figure 5)

While users begin to create their player, the game establishes ties between expressive, cosmetic design and microtransactions by limiting the ways users can modify their avatar. For example, the game only starts with five default hair styles but informs the users at the bottom of the screen that they can “Visit Doc’s Barbershop on Main Street for many more hair styles” (Figure 6).

What the game does not tell users is that those hair styles will cost virtual currency just like everything else in the game including clothing, the physical mechanics of a particular jump shot or dunk, tattoos, shoes, and of course actual athletic skill (Figure 7).

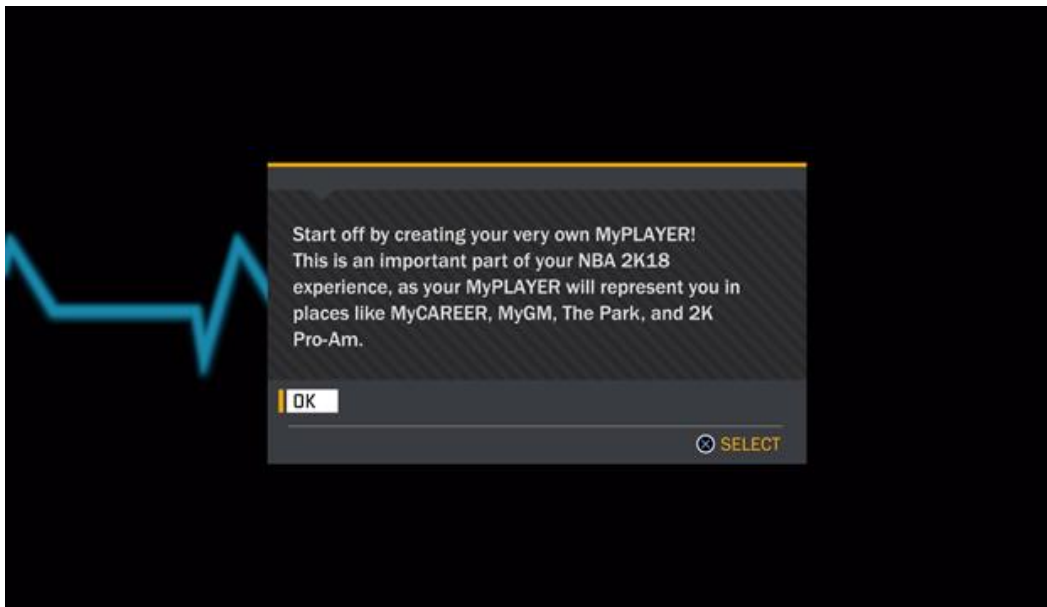


Figure 5



Figure 6



Figure 7

As users begin their careers, the game pushes them toward associating their character with the prototypical NBA star by referencing well-known players when users choose team positions and default jump shot animations. To begin with, users must choose between one of the five positions in the NBA—point guard, shooting guard, small forward, power forward, and

center—and once they do so, the game frames their avatar next to famous players who share that position. For example, if users choose small forward, they see their avatars next to notable small forwards Giannis Antetokounmpo, Kevin Durant, LeBron James, and Kawhi Leonard (Figure 8). And before players get to play a match, the game prompts them to choose a jump shot that mirrors the mechanics of an NBA star like Kyrie Irving, Stephen Curry, or Anthony Davis, among several others. These early choices encourage users to bring their knowledge and fandom of the NBA into how they view their avatar’s identity and establish a precedent for modification that will later become tied to economic transactions.



Figure 8

Once users decide on the MyPLAYER’s initial settings, the career mode’s narrative takes over and users move from the “proving ground” of street ball competitions, naturally sponsored by Air Jordan and NBA 2K, to receiving a rookie contract in the NBA as an undrafted prospect. During this period of time, the game also allows users to decide which team they will sign with, satisfying any ardent fan of a particular organization, and to state an early preference for shoe sponsorship among four options: Nike, Under Armour, Air Jordan, and Adidas. Of course, users

must improve their skills and standing considerably before they can achieve said sponsorship, as the game persuades them to buy into the commodification of the sport writ large by viewing sponsorship as a symbol of prestige. After these preliminary choices are resolved, the game brings users into the MyCAREER mode's open world Neighborhood setting, allowing them to go play career season games, online matches with friends or strangers, use training facilities to work toward different skill upgrade badges, or use vendors to change their avatar's appearance. However, as users engage with this space more and more, they must inevitably realize that the game has rigged the progression system and their 60-rating starting point and time-consuming accumulation of a VC salary does not allow for much meaningful functionality.

The purposeful stagnation of the game's progression system inspired a controversy both around the game itself and the industry trend of "pay to play" microtransaction models. For example, *Kotaku* published an article criticizing the microtransactions and writing that "in general, playing myCareer mode is a constant reminder of how much VC you don't have."⁵⁵ Meanwhile, *Forbes* used *NBA 2K18* to make a larger industrial observation: "It does feel like we're being pushed into a new phase of microtransactions, one that's going above and beyond what we've seen previously from the monetization format."⁵⁶ In the case of *NBA 2K18* itself, users will quickly note that they have to play around ten full games simply to raise their rating by a single point and as one user estimated on Reddit, they would have to play roughly 240 games as their character to get an overall rating of 86.⁵⁷ Moreover, whenever users load MyCAREER,

⁵⁵ Gita Jackson, "NBA 2K18 Is Riddled With Microtransactions," *Kotaku*, September 19, 2017, <https://kotaku.com/nba-2k18-is-riddled-with-microtransactions-1818554307>.

⁵⁶ Paul Tassi, "Will 'NBA 2K18' or 'Shadow of War' be a Breaking Point for Microtransactions?," *Forbes*, September 26, 2017, <https://www.forbes.com/sites/insertcoin/2017/09/26/will-nba-2k18-or-shadow-of-war-be-a-breaking-point-for-microtransactions/#632bbbac2135>.

⁵⁷ CowardAgent, "MyCAREER: This is getting ridiculous," *Reddit*, October 2017, https://www.reddit.com/r/NBA2k/comments/70gvq5/this_is_getting_ridiculous/.

the load screens remind them of their standing in the progression system with text messages that reference “The Road to 99,” meaning a maxed-out rating, along with a reminder of the users’ current MyPLAYER rating. With this leverage firmly in place, users are then reminded at every turn of The Neighborhood that wealth breeds greater access to this virtual space.

As users continue to play 2K’s MyPLAYER mode, the environment likewise works to commercialize both basketball fandom and black culture. Once The Neighborhood loads, users see their avatar represented in an urban space filled with colorful graffiti and real-world advertisements for companies like Mountain Dew and Foot Locker. Users can then interact with the game’s VC vendors including a shoe store, clothing store, tattoo parlor, barbershop, and arcade. Significantly, when users enter the barbershop, they trigger a cutscene in which they learn that their character knows the all-black personnel, had grown up in the neighborhood, and used to sleep in the barber chairs as a kid. Doc, the eponymous owner of Doc’s Barbershop, then tells the character not to forget where they came from, gesturing to the NBA’s well-worn meritocracy myth of rising up from the streets and poverty to achieve athletic (and financial) success.⁵⁸ After this cut scene, *NBA 2K18* repurposes the racialized space of the barbershop to sell its users new hairstyles as part of the game’s larger efforts to commoditize self-expression (Figure 9). The Neighborhood can then be considered a larger version of the same basic dynamic, as the game suffuses the space with licensed hip-hop music and includes a number of street ball pick-up game options, which act as an attempt to speak to what the developer views as the broader culture surrounding the NBA. *NBA 2K18* even had a marketing campaign around the slogan “Run the Neighborhood” to sell the game with the following words: “this year, you don’t

⁵⁸ David L. Andrews, “The Fact(s) of Michael Jordan’s Blackness: Excavating a Floating Racial Signifier,” *Sociology of Sport Journal* 13 (1996).

just play the game, you live it.”⁵⁹ In other words, the developers consciously created a shallow facsimile of a black neighborhood, populated it with its virtual audience, and then put a price on all of its functionality.



Figure 9

Finally, the game subverts the potential comradery of an online *NBA2K* gaming community by integrating its onerous progression system into the design of *The Neighborhood*’s street ball pick-up games. Specifically, users with lower rankings have a difficult time finding pleasurable matchups as the game allows any user to join a match queue instead of separating these matches by different rankings. If a user with a 65 rating joins a queue to play a 3-on-3 match on one of *The Neighborhood*’s concrete courts, there is nothing to stop two users with 90 ratings from joining the fray and throwing off the balance. This creates a climate in which users once more feel compelled to spend money on VC just in order to keep up and play with the larger *NBA 2K18* community. Additionally, the game features an online mode in which users can wager their VC on matches, taking what could be a friendly competition and providing economic

⁵⁹ NBA 2K, “NBA 2K18 – Run the Neighborhood,” video, August 31, 2017, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=3EPHnjHu77g>.

stakes. With these new features, the game may suggest an affinity to the broader culture of basketball fandom but it inevitably returns to the gravitational orbit of its in-game economy in the process. In the expanding world of *NBA 2K18*, users may find new opportunities to express their culture and their NBA fandom (limited as those new forms of expression may be), but the changes come at a cost. To play the game is to feel the gnawing drive for affluence, especially if users eschew the microtransaction market and labor at accumulating VC through gameplay.

Conclusion

By studying the history of digital expansions in the gaming industry, we can observe a constant push to reinvent a game's appeal on the market. In these cases, it would be easy to label these efforts solely as shallow cash grabs meant to wring a few more dollars out of players as they enjoy their games. However, that description does not capture the full extent to which the culture of gaming has shifted as producers work to expand on these titles. In some cases, these expansions can create tiers of engagement for those who purchase DLC content and those that do not. These add-ons can also create the impression that players can buy unfair advantages in online competition—for example, the seeming pay-to-win mechanics of *Fallout 76*'s (2018) purchasable repair kits, *Destiny 2*'s purchasable armor, or *Call of Duty: Black Ops 4*'s (2018) purchasable XP boost. In other cases, games use a player's desire for online expression to commercialize character skins and emotes, which have become the driving force behind the successful implementations of 'season' add-ons in *Fortnite* and the character-driven loot boxes in *Overwatch* (2016). In these instances, digital games base much of their appeal and functionality on implementing these small additions and create a context in which the game's rewards are tied to its economic expansion.

With that said, the way DLC changes games have a number of other implications worthy of further study. In some cases, DLC add-ons can fundamentally change the nature of the text and rewrite the player's experience. For example, Ubisoft faced controversy with their DLC for *Assassin's Creed Odyssey* (2018), which ret-conned the player's potential choice to follow a queer narrative by forcing their character into a mandatory heteronormative relationship.⁶⁰ In other cases, DLC can cause us to consider what kind of ownership players have over this add-on material as Bungie's *Destiny 2* recently deleted two years' worth of paid content from their core game.⁶¹ DLC gives producers a chance to reshape the game after its release and as games become increasingly reliant on constant Internet connections to maintain their use the players lose control over the digital futures of the games they own.

We can also consider that when games rely on heavy turnover rates of DLC content to keep audiences engaged, this can exacerbate the existing industry conditions of crunch labor. In a study on game development burnout and an industry push toward unionization, *Time's* Alana Semeuls highlights this change by noting:

Today, more than 90 percent of video game consoles are connected to the Internet [...] That has allowed game studios to constantly update and refresh their existing games, in part through "DLC" [...] like new weapons or levels that players can purchase. Gamers now expect and demand such content, which studios can profit handsomely from —

⁶⁰ Shabana Arif, "Ubisoft Apologizes to Players for Assassin's Creed Unity DLC Controversy," *IGN*, January 18, 2019, <https://www.ign.com/articles/2019/01/18/ubisoft-apologizes-to-players-for-assassins-creed-odyssey-dlc-controversy>.

⁶¹ Paul Tassi, "'Destiny 2' and the Ethics of Deleting Two Years of Paid Content," *Forbes*, August 22, 2020, <https://www.forbes.com/sites/paultassi/2020/08/22/destiny-2-and-the-ethics-of-deleting-two-years-of-paid-content/?sh=5859e99c19bd>.

putting yet more pressure on workers for months or even years after a game's release date.⁶²

Kate Edwards also argues that DLC not only exacerbates crunch labor by extending the demand for work but also because it creates a context in which game companies try to apply mobile business models to Triple AAA games without accounting for the inherent differences in workload demands and so have unrealistic expectations for the labor.⁶³ In this way, the co-development of mobile and console digital distribution strategies have important consequences not just on how console games have pushed toward more microtransaction systems but also toward how they change the environment for laborers.

Ultimately, I believe that the console's incorporation of DLC and in-game economies presents its audience with a fundamental transformation of the gaming environments. Even when these new online environments present an "optional" buy-in for the game's virtual economy, oftentimes the larger functionality of digital games or the surrounding culture of its online community reinforces a need for players to continually invest in order to enjoy the game they already bought to its fullest potential. In some cases, a game like *NBA 2K18* may attempt to force a connection between online community and digital currency tie-ins, building a clear groundwork for its economic demands in the game's first incorporation of the MyNeighborhood social space. In other cases, such as the evolving design add-ons for Epic's *Fortnite*, the developers may build in the purposeful commodification of expressivity once they had already established their game's community. Either way, the trends that emerged with DLC demonstrate

⁶² Alana Semuels, "'Every Game You Like is Built on the Backs of Workers.' Video Game Creators are Burned Out and Desperate for Change," *Time*, June 11, 2019, <https://time.com/5603329/e3-video-game-creators-union/>.

⁶³ Kate Edwards, quoted by Dean Takahashi, "Why 'Crunch Time' is Still a Problem in the Video Game Industry," *VentureBeat*, March 20, 2016, <https://venturebeat.com/2016/03/20/why-crunch-time-is-still-a-problem-in-the-video-game-industry/>.

how producers not only tie digital gaming's expansion and overlapping commodification to a game's functionality but also to its cultural use.

When considering the industry's implementation of DLC it becomes necessary for us to consider the branching paths the expansions have taken in history and what our present media landscape says about the industry's priorities and the effect of those priorities on player experience. On the surface, DLC offers gamers the promise of revival. It quite literally can expand on a game they may love and give them new reasons to play. However, these moments of expansion cannot be easily separated from their commercial potential and at some point the game's commoditization defines the way it expands. As Kline et al. argue:

The paradox of information capitalism is that even as it encourages an expanded enclave of freedom and self-development of "pure play," it begins to undermine that enclave by commodifying it. For the more play became distributed in the marketplace, the more its forms and boundaries were set by a commercialized media system.⁶⁴

To their point, these boundaries have only grown more distinct as games become markets in and of themselves that sell us their expansions directly, paradoxically enclosing us within a winding catacomb of commerce.

⁶⁴ Stephen Kline, Greig De Peuter, and Nick Dyer-Witheford, *Digital Play: The Interaction of Technology, Culture, and Marketing* (Québec City: McGill-Queen's University Press, 2003), 245.

Chapter 3: Broken Games and the Perpetual Update Culture

In 2014, a documentary crew crowded around the exhumation of a landfill in Alamogordo, New Mexico as contract workers unearthed discarded copies of one of the most notorious video games in the industry's history: Atari 2600's *E.T. The Extra-Terrestrial* (1982). Atari made the game as a tie-in to Steven Spielberg's blockbuster film, on a brutal five-week development crunch, and initially sold over a million copies before the game gained a reputation as unplayable. Ultimately, Atari was left with another three million *E.T.* game cartridges they could not sell and chose to dump them into a New Mexican landfill as the company shambled toward bankruptcy. Several decades removed from that failure, some viewed the story of *E.T.*'s landfill graveyard as apocryphal—up until a documentary crew helped excavate hundreds of still-playable cartridges and the city of Alamogordo sold the copies on eBay for over a hundred thousand dollars.¹ Until recently, this odd historical resurrection was the most a broken game could aspire to: a failure so spectacular it creates its own legacy and resurgence. However, these circumstances were for the broken games of old, games tied to the limitations of physical media and brick-and-mortar markets, before the industry gained the ability to update products after release and rewrite their failures.

Over the last decade, critics and players have increasingly used the term *broken game* to name a growing trend in which industry producers release games filled with glitches, error messages, sluggish framerates, and missing content. Often, these issues indicate poor quality assurance and can result from producers attempting to hit advantageous release dates set in

¹ Megan Geuss, "881 *E.T.* Cartridges Buried in New Mexico Desert Sell for \$107,930.15," *Ars Technica*, August 31, 2015, <https://arstechnica.com/gaming/2015/08/881-e-t-cartridges-buried-in-new-mexico-desert-sell-for-107930-15/>.

advance, to innovate new open-world and online game designs, and to generally push development crunch labor to its limits.²

However, the conceptualization of the broken game also lies at the fault lines of larger digital changes in the industry wherein developers use updates to resolve coding issues after a release. In an early use of the term, *Giant Bomb*'s Jeff Gerstmann writes on expectations for updates in a review for the initially glitch-laden *Fallout: New Vegas* (2010):

If you're the type of person who likes to watch for a patch or two before settling into a game, know this now: you probably don't want to play *Fallout: New Vegas* right away.

But if you can accept a partially broken game, *Fallout: New Vegas* is well-worth the trip.³

In this review, the author outlines audience expectations just beginning to form around popular releases hastily produced for the market: either play an imperfect game at release or wait for the developers to (hopefully) address issues in a patched update. Consider, then, the shift in reception that takes place when a game can reinvent itself and when its discourse revolves around that possibility more than the version of a game users would play at release. In early gaming history, if audiences found a title unplayable they would simply not play it and the game would fade from public view as its reputation cemented and sales plummeted. However, digital distribution practices can help game producers stave off a poor reception, creating a text that instead constantly evokes its own future potential.

As developers and publishers make increasing use of direct network access and compulsory updates, their work complicates our understanding of the digital text. In this modern

² Nick Dyer-Witheford and Greg de Peuter, "'EA Spouse' and the Crisis of Video Game Labour: Enjoyment, Exclusion, Exploitation, Exodus," *Canadian Journal of Communication* 31, no. 3 (2006); Mia Consalvo, "Crunched by Passion: Women Game Developers and Workplace Challenges," in *Beyond Barbie and Mortal Combat: New Perspectives on Gender and Gaming*, edited by Yasmin B. Kafai, Carrie Heeter, Jill Denner, and Jennifer Y. Sun (Cambridge: MIT Press, 2008).

³ Jeff Gerstmann, "Fallout New Vegas Review," *Giant Bomb*, October 18, 2010, <https://www.giantbomb.com/reviews/fallout-new-vegas-review/1900-326/>.

context, the industry can respond to criticism in real time and as they do so their attempts to moderate perceived failure become embedded in the game's code itself. This prompts a series of difficult questions about the nature of digital games and their lifecycle as a commodity. When developers reshape digital texts after they have been sold, how do audiences react? Do they wait patiently for a patch, push back against these practices, or work along with the company to resolve these issues by reporting on bugs and errors? And how do these ad-hoc efforts to utilize crowd labor change the way we might think of free labor not just as an ingrained institutionalized practice but also as a more adroit response to a crisis? To fully appreciate this change in status for the digital game and the contestation between game producers and their audience, we must look at how a broken game's evolving reception can influence post-release revisions and how the industry can then work to redirect and harvest its audience's outrage.

In this chapter, I explore how companies and audiences negotiate failure in the digital age, at a time when that failure can eventually be overwritten. To capture the breadth of this conflict, I focus on the historically volatile reception of Ubisoft's *Assassin's Creed Unity* (2014) as my case study. Released for the holiday shopping season on November 11th, 2014, Ubisoft's game faced immediate and intense backlash from players and critics alike due to a host of cosmetic and game-halting bugs. After the backlash, Ubisoft released an official apology to their players, gave away free downloadable content (DLC), solicited their audience's help with reporting bugs, and released multiple updates over the course of months to mend the broken game. I argue that negotiated failure in cases like Ubisoft's *Assassin's Creed Unity* constitute a larger movement toward extending the logic of a perpetual beta to the digital commodity. By fostering an indefinite beta atmosphere within the context of a purchase, the industry then encourages what we could call a *perpetual update culture*—wherein developers continually

improve a product after its release and can even profit from an audience's desire to contribute to that process by reporting on bugs through the company's official forum and customer support tickets. In such cases, the game does not reach its audience as a finished product but remains open to a developer's interventions. The audience's experience with a game then becomes inextricably linked to its economic context and inherent instability.

I begin my chapter by taking a closer look at *Assassin's Creed Unity*'s production context, demonstrating how it exemplifies a turning point in the industry as game productions increasingly rely on updates and extended production timelines. I then relate these changes to the broader software development trends of perpetual betas, while drawing on Jonathan Zittrain's work on contingent appliances⁴ and Jan Švelch's writing on perpetual updates⁵ to demonstrate how digital networks change distribution trends and how audience expectations can change with them. I look to further these discussions on digital development practices by considering the ways in which update cultures structure a circumscribed engagement with digital texts and reinforce a company's interests. To that end, I contend that game companies use updates and the rhetoric of constant improvement to motivate free labor from a spurned audience. To underscore how this negotiation around the broken game takes shape, I analyze the audience discourse surrounding *Assassin's Creed Unity* in depth and highlight how audiences attempt to engage with both the developer and other players. By examining this discourse on Ubisoft's own forum, I hope to outline both the reasons why users post messages to either support or critique the game and the ways that the official forum can mediate that conversation and support the developer's position. That initial point of reference then has an impact on whether players are primed to not

⁴ Jonathan Zittrain, *The Future of the Internet and How to Stop It* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2008).

⁵ Jan Švelch, "Resisting the Perpetual Update: Struggles Against Protocological Power in Video Games," *New Media & Society* 21, no. 7 (2019).

only accept this digital status quo but also contribute to the perpetual update process by reporting on bugs and errors.

As I examine the audience discourses surrounding broken games, I outline a slow acculturation toward digital impermanence and incomplete game development as a new industry norm. Looking at digital games as a key example, I hope to suggest broader implications for the capricious nature of digital media commodities and ways in which audiences either adjust to or resist these changes. When companies use a text's digital affordances to revise failure, they ultimately sell their audience a product that resembles a service model of business more than a self-confined text and can use that open-ended framing to resist controversy through the promise of improved updates. Furthermore, the gaming industry offers a particularly salient case study for these practices when we consider how a player's desire to participate and interact with the text can be harnessed by producers looking to reframe failed gameplay as a chance for players to flag bugs and glitches. As producers cultivate a perpetual update culture, they can then place audiences in a position in which their outrage indicates a threshold for needed adjustments and harness free labor through the player's desire to attain the game initially promised to them.

Ubisoft's Failure to Launch and Gaming's New Digital Normal

When Ubisoft released *Assassin's Creed Unity*, the troubled state of the game became apparent almost immediately. *Unity*'s list of bugs included error codes that would freeze the game after different sequences, missing or misplaced textures, glitches in the collision software that caused characters to fall through the earth or stand in-between walls, network issues that kept players from downloading the game or playing it online, and severely sluggish framerates (Figure 1). Immediately following *Unity*'s release, critics panned the game following a publisher-imposed review embargo, numerous players took to the aggregate site *Metacritic* to

review-bomb the title, and still others flooded Ubisoft's official forum to report on bugs, seek workarounds for common issues, and petition the game producers directly for needed changes. To this last point, posts on Ubisoft's official forum numbered well into the thousands within days as the game's pronounced failure coincided with high expectations for the popular franchise — particularly as Ubisoft marketed *Unity* as a showcase for their next-gen graphics system for the PlayStation 4 and Xbox One—and Ubisoft's strong marketing push toward presales. The conditions surrounding the franchise's large following, the tantalizing promise of *Unity*'s release, and its unavoidable shortcomings then led to an especially turbulent reception notable for the fervor of its backlash and the ways that Ubisoft scrambled to control the narrative of their release.



Figure 1

While Ubisoft scrambled to revise the reception around their game, *Unity*'s release was also sparking a larger reaction in the gaming community as players and critics observed that Ubisoft's broken game was merely the latest and most visible example of a growing industry trend. In assessments of the industry, both *Forbes* and *Polygon* proclaimed 2014 the year in

which broken games became a new norm as prominent releases *Halo: The Master Chief Collection* (2014) and *DriveClub* (2014) likewise suffered from a slew of bugs, game-ending errors and network issues that took months to resolve.⁶ This trio of initially unplayable games then capped a growing list of troubled titles over the last several years: including the notable blunders of Electronic Arts' *Battlefield 4* (2013), which required developers to work for over a year to fix online glitches, and Activision's *Diablo 3* (2012), which suffered from never-ending load screens and network errors that forced the developer to take down the game's servers several times in the weeks after its release. As broken games reached a saturation point in the market, they then highlighted changing digital distribution and publishing norms that reframed the game commodity as a fluid and unstable text.

By 2014, game developers and publishers had fully adapted to a console industry capable of constant revision for almost a decade. In the respective launches of the Xbox 360 (2005) and Playstation 3 (2006), the industry gained a consistently available proprietary network capable of streamlining game updates on the day of release. These digital affordances led to changes in production timelines as developers took advantage of the 'day-one patch', an industry term describing last-minute updates developed after a studio produces a gold master, gains certification on major consoles, and ships physical copies of the game to storefronts. Within that interim period of one to three months, developers can work on unresolved issues from beta testing and gain some flexibility on hitting their original release schedule by prompting players

⁶ Michael McWhertor, "2014 in Review: The Year That Sucked," *Polygon*, December 21, 2014, <https://www.polygon.com/2014/12/21/7413619/2014-in-review-the-year-that-sucked>; Jason Evangelho, "6 Crucial Changes the Game Industry (And Its Customers) Must Make in 2015," *Forbes*, December 2, 2014, <https://www.forbes.com/sites/jasonevangelho/2014/12/02/6-crucial-changes-the-video-game-industry-and-its-customers-must-make-in-2015/#230e7f80170e>.

to update the game the moment they load it on their consoles. In an op-ed championing the day-one patch, indie developer Rami Ismail points toward its benefits:

If you've got months to improve upon a game that went through [certification], do you think you would leave those months? Do you think game audiences would appreciate a developer just kind of doing nothing for three months? [...] Anybody arguing that a game should be done when it goes 'gold' is living in the 90s.⁷

With that said, the growing prominence of broken games, along with scores of releases not troubled enough to earn the title but still requiring several updates to play 'correctly', underscore the gamble involved with relying on day-one patches. And when these last-minute, hurried updates spill into a game's post-release timeline it reorients audience expectations for what constitutes a finished game in the market.

While developers increasingly depended on the safety net of last-minute updates, publishers were also emphasizing presales as a means of guaranteeing revenue and combating the competition of second-hand pre-owned markets. James Newman connects these efforts to an overall attitude toward forced obsolescence and argues that marketing hype cycles, exclusive presale DLC, and participation in open betas can work to sell players on the future of gaming.⁸ When we consider the push toward selling a game's future potential, we can also note a tension when that idea extends to post-game updates. In the case of *Unity*, Ubisoft had already sold many of their audience on presales—in fact, they used a pervasive social media campaign to bolster a series record for presale purchases—and then had to continue convincing their audience of the game's promise after its faltering release (Figure 2). In the aforementioned *Polygon* op-ed on

⁷ Rami Ismail, "Why 'Day-One Patches' Are So Common," *Kotaku*, August 8, 2016, <https://kotaku.com/why-day-one-patches-are-so-common-1784967193>.

⁸ James Newman, *Best Before: Videogames, Supersession and Obsolescence* (London: Routledge, 2012), 73.

2014's year of broken games, Michael McWhertor expressed a frustration that broken titles like *Unity* had “incentivized a day-one purchase” with exclusive DLC and that “those pre-order incentives, designed to appeal to players who buy into a game with good faith and fear of missing out on something special, don't benefit those who can't actually play the game they've supported on day one.”⁹ With that said, I believe game producers can still take frustrations surrounding tenuous notions of ‘good faith’ and ‘support’ and work to redirect them, especially since these descriptions indicate a high level of engagement with the game already. And when game producers ask for their audience to report on bugs, to follow along with the progress of patch notes, and to enjoy free DLC for a game that will *eventually* be playable, they simultaneously enfold their audience within the once and future potential of their game and company.



Figure 2

The industry trends of day-one patches likewise align with the ways the industry has pushed to innovate game development at speeds at which it cannot always maintain. Consider,

⁹ McWhertor (2014).

for instance, how developer Jurie Horneman discusses game production as a never-ending process of optimization in which “you can always do more – until you break. We see that a lot in the game industry, and it leads to stress, crunch, bad games, and burnouts.”¹⁰ Similarly, when Bethesda’s director Todd Howard was interviewed about the company’s most recent broken game *Fallout 76* (2018), he emphasized the difficulty involved with making *Fallout* into an open-world, online experience by using new development tools and networked systems. He goes on to say:

Any time you’re going to be doing something new like that you know you’re going to have your bumps [...] There’s a period once you launch: it’s not how you launch, it’s what it becomes.¹¹

While both Horneman and Howard speak on these development trends as features of industry innovation, the increased use of corrective updates has yet to fully codify as an industry standard—in part due to audience expectations. When the interviewer pressed Howard on how to rehabilitate the image of a bad launch, he simply replied “I think there’s no strategy other than just keep making the game better.”¹² In part, this sentiment may present false modesty but when we study these receptions we learn that audiences remain divided on the merits of digital change and cases like broken games exacerbate how much good will they are willing to extend to media producers.

As we consider these industry conditions, we must acknowledge the ways in which the digital turn in gaming has ushered in profound changes for how producers and players interact

¹⁰ Jurie Horneman, “Knowing When to Stop,” *gameindustry.biz*, June 2, 2015, <https://www.gamesindustry.biz/articles/2015-06-01-knowing-when-to-stop>.

¹¹ Todd Howard, interview by Joseph Knoop, “Bethesda Knew *Fallout 76* ‘Would Have Bumps’ - IGN Unfiltered,” *IGN*, June 2, 2019, <https://uk.ign.com/articles/2019/06/02/bethesda-knew-fallout-76-would-have-bumps-a-ign-unfiltered>.

¹² *Ibid.*

over the status of a release. To that end, the industry's pursuit of online service models has implications beyond the incorporation of subscription-based MMOs, in-game currencies, and microtransaction systems I detailed in Chapter 2. While these fixtures remain vital in understanding the formation of new digital business models, we can broaden this view to consider the market value of updates particularly in moments of temporary crisis. Likewise, we should push our discussions on player participation beyond the notable work in game studies literature outlining labor concerns with modding practices and co-development practices in online gaming (Chapter 1). To that end, if we use a game's troubled reception as a framework to consider audience participation, it can underline a broader push from the industry to acculturate players to norms of digital change that privilege the tantalizing promise of a game as a default—even in moments of contested failure. By analyzing update cultures for broken games and the developer's strategic use of their own forum to influence their receptions, we can witness a shift in digital gaming wherein updates provide game producers the means to take further control over that process of digital revisionism (see also: Chapter 4).

Ultimately, I believe the flashpoint for *Assassin Creed Unity*'s troubled release offers a point in history in which we can see the industry's push toward a perpetual update culture coalesce as Ubisoft courts its own audience to help mend their broken game on their official forum. Aphra Kerr elaborates on the implicit value of these contributions, arguing that:

If we view [game] production as a social process involving multiple cycles of design and use, then we have to recognize the unfinished nature of artefacts that are launched on the market, the fact that technical artefacts change over time and that part of this change over

time is induced or produced by users and/or their knowledge, knowledge about them, and their labour.¹³

While the impact of these contributions can be difficult to measure, they nevertheless indicate an attempt to redirect the broad support and fandom of players into a specific value exchange. In the case of broken games, this impulse toward harnessing free audience labor likewise offers developers the flexibility to moderate audience backlash and capitalize on the increased foot traffic on their forums, as players seek answers for a highly anticipated game they find (temporarily) unplayable. This proposed change in framing, to see games as an unfinished text that benefits from player contributions, then aligns itself with larger trends in new media and the growing importance of perpetual betas and open designs in troubling ways.

Gaming and the Perpetual Update Culture

While the video game industry attempts to literally *game* the system of digital distribution, their use of updates do not originate in a vacuum. Many new media scholars have already commented on the affordances of digital texts, highlighting similar implications for their innate instability. When describing new media, Lev Manovich outlines variability as a key characteristic, writing that “a new media object is not something fixed once and for all, but something that can exist in different, potentially infinite versions.”¹⁴ He goes on to note that updates ensure that media can be “created and customized on the fly,” helping to reinforce “a post-industrial logic of ‘production on demand’ and ‘just in time’ delivery,” a logic that would later align with the video game industry’s reliance on patching a game on or after its release

¹³ Aphra Kerr, “Player Production and Innovation in Online Games: Time for New Rules?” in *The Social and Cultural Significance of Online Game*, edited by Garry Crawford, Victoria K. Gosling, Ben Light (New York: Routledge, 2011), 26.

¹⁴ Lev Manovich, *The Language of New Media* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 2001), 36.

date.¹⁵ On the other hand, Wendy Hui Kyong Chun comments on new media's obsession with novelty, writing that "things no longer updated are things no longer used, useable, or cared for, even though updates often 'save' things by literally destroying—that is, writing over—the things they resuscitate."¹⁶ Victoria Simon likewise notes how versioning in apps work to align "user expectations and design philosophy" and that "in the process of developing apps, the desired result is never a finished product."¹⁷ However, tensions can arise when new media finds itself in transition from a more traditionally finite commodity to an open-ended digital one. Video games, in particular, offer an important example of a text in transition as gamers still frequently purchase a physical disc but then find that game altered by their connection to the Internet and the digital marketplace. Thus, a product that was once fixed and predictable now changes at whim once it inhabits a digital space.

Of course, the ways in which these digital texts change directly corresponds to the intentions of media producers. Considering this dynamic, we can place the digital game in relation to what Jonathan Zittrain calls tethered appliances, which provide vendors an ability to change their products from afar "long after the devices have left warehouses and showrooms."¹⁸ Zittrain goes on to write that this tethered relationship fosters a new user-experience based on *contingency* as users functionally rent these appliances rather than own them—even if they *do* pay for them upfront—since they do not control the process of a product's updating and its potential "instantaneous revision."¹⁹ More recently, scholars have built on Zittrain's description of contingency to describe new media products as contingent commodities. Jeremy Morris points

¹⁵ Ibid.

¹⁶ Wendy Hui Kyong Chun, *Updating to Remain the Same: Habitual New Media* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 2016), 2.

¹⁷ Victoria Simon, "iMaschine 2: Music-making apps and interface aesthetics," in *Appified: Culture in the Age of Apps*, edited by Jeremy W. Morris and Sarah Murray (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2018), 273.

¹⁸ Zittrain (2008), 106.

¹⁹ Ibid. 107.

out that these contingent characteristics create a context in which new media “can be reprogrammed or defined without our knowledge or consent.”²⁰ Additionally, David Nieborg and Thomas Poell examine how developers use online platforms to “leverage the contingent nature of games as software by continuously altering, extending, and upgrading game content and functionalities, while simultaneously optimizing its monetization model.”²¹ In these descriptions, updates work to surreptitiously reshape the commodity in ways that highlight a user’s loss of control over new media and even indicate how user experience may help developers finetune digital business models—a particularly salient concern when we consider the game industry’s growing adoption of in-game economies and microtransaction systems.

While these accounts often focus on the producer-side of the contingent exchange and ways in which digital affordances become a means of economic leverage, I believe we can learn more about how audience receptions complicate these efforts. With that caveat in mind, Jan Švelch offers a critical elaboration on contingency in his article “Resisting the Perpetual Update”, as he discusses how users interact with gaming software dependent on the logic of constant updated adjustments:

The autonomy to choose whether to update or not has been replaced by self-maintaining online gaming platforms and by the growing acceptance of the “games as service” paradigm [...] With this change, the general role of patches has evolved from technical support into a tool of iterative game design and control over the way the game is played.²²

²⁰ Jeremy Morris, “Sounds in the Cloud: Cloud Computing and the Digital Music Commodity,” *First Monday* 16, no. 5 (2011): np, <https://firstmonday.org/ojs/index.php/fm/article/download/3391/2917>.

²¹ David B. Nieborg and Thomas Poell, “The Platformization of Cultural Productions: Theorizing the Contingent Cultural Commodity,” *New Media & Society* 20, no. 11 (2018): 4284.

²² Švelch (2018), 1599.

Still, Švelch goes on to argue that these norms have yet to fully codify and that users can resist the protocol logic of constant updates even if their resistance partly depends on “how much producers embrace the ‘games as service’ paradigm.”²³ With broken games, though, the inability to ‘opt out’ of the process becomes a site of contention since that would render a game unplayable but resistance can still manifest in different ways other than simply avoiding the exponentially versioned nature of game design. That then leads us to question how both audiences and the industry negotiate the terms of acceptance for these updates when they unpredictably become both *essential* and *latent* in broken game development.

When we consider broken games within these terms, they at first appear to be an aberration for how we might think of contingent commodities. For one, contingency seems far more transparent as developers share patch notes and work on bugs and glitches that their own users often bring to their attention. Similarly, industry rhetoric frames these changes as recompense for development failure rather than as an intended feature of iterative control. However, it is for these reasons that broken games provide an important case study to evaluate update cultures because the overtures required to negotiate failure strip away some of the artifice surrounding the industry logic of updates. Moreover, they point to the ways in which a frustration involved with updating directly conflicts with feelings of inevitability as more and more new media texts align with the digital ethos of “always improving, never complete.” These optimistic maxims of digital culture then suggest a close affinity with development trends of perpetual beta designs that originated with the historic push of Web 2.0 technologies. And to better understand the ways in which game audiences and industry negotiate the role of updating

²³ Ibid. 1606

with broken games, we must look to the ways in which a perpetual update culture works as an extension of the perpetual beta logic.

The term perpetual beta gained traction when scholars and industry professionals attempted to define the changing Internet landscape of Web 2.0. Efthymios Constantinides and Sefan J. Fountain described Web 2.0 as “a collection of open-source, interactive and user-controlled online applications expanding the experiences, knowledge and market power of the users as participants in business and social processes.”²⁴ Tim O’Reilly similarly outlined how Web 2.0 afforded a perpetual beta function:

The open source dictum, “release early and release often” in fact has morphed into an even more radical position, “the perpetual beta,” in which the product is developed in the open, with new features slipstreamed in on a monthly, weekly, or even daily basis.²⁵

Software like Google Maps, Flickr, and del.icio.us have all distributed their software in beta modes and have allowed user experience to help augment their product, while other major software firms take a similar “soft open” tact without explicitly using the term *beta*. Still, there remains several important differences between the perpetual beta approach and the use of retroactive, revisionist updates.

In a perpetual update culture, the beta process remains an influence but must contend with divergent industry conditions, creating a set of distinct characteristics around how these changes happen. To begin with, developers change the text through large updates rather than streamlined and interactive changes in the code. This may seem like a small detail, but if nothing else larger updates call attention to the fact that changes are being made and this process fails to

²⁴ Efthymios Constantinides and Sefan J. Fountain, “Web 2.0: Conceptual Foundations and Marketing Issues,” *Journal of Direct, Data and Digital Marketing Practice* 9 (2008): 232.

²⁵ Tim O’Reilly, “What is Web 2.0: Design Patterns and Business Models for the Next Generation of Software,” *O’Reilly*, September 30, 2005, <http://www.oreilly.com/pub/a/web2/archive/what-is-web-20.html?page=4>.

be invisible and intuitive. Consequently, when Ubisoft eventually released a forty-plus gigabyte update for *Assassin's Creed Unity* weeks after its launch, the pronouncement of failure was unavoidable. The company's digital intervention also occurs within the context of a traditional purchase, whereas betas typically involve free software and openly communicate its own unfinished, ongoing development. In contrast, the failed expectations of a "broken game" release galvanizes controversy precisely because companies sell the games as finished products but approach them as unfinished and subject to improvement after release.

The relationship between players and developers also presents important differences for how we contextualize this case of digital change. When discussing a variant on perpetual beta called permanently beta, in which the beta process is understood to be a permanent rather than indeterminate fixture of the software, Gina Neff and David Stark note that "permanently beta is, in part, a form of simultaneous and collaborative design and engineering that brings users into the process."²⁶ They go on to note that the approach "affords the possibility of influencing which values are encoded into organizations and technologies—and for users to incorporate *their* values into the structures around them."²⁷ In contrast, a perpetual update culture attenuates the user's control over the software, since calls for change must be mediated through the software developer. There *are* opportunities for users to exert a modest degree of their values on a text if a game's backlash is severe enough to prompt a developer to make changes. However, the interconnection between users and software in the video game industry is hardly as symbiotic or direct as its open-source software contemporaries. Ultimately, game developers retain final say

²⁶ Gina Neff and David Stark, "Permanently Beta: Responsive Organization in the Internet Era," in *Society Online: The Internet in Context*, edited by Philip N. Howard and Steve Jones (Thousand Oaks: Sage Publications, 2004), 183.

²⁷ *Ibid.* 186.

over changes in a text's code and while players can influence these decisions, amendments to the code only happen when a company has an incentive to make them.

Additionally, when players flag bugs and errors and contribute to changes in a game their participation arguably constitutes a form of free labor. After all, players essentially perform the role of beta testers when they report on bugs to the developers, without a clear benefit for their activity beyond receiving the game they were initially promised. Meanwhile, developers profit from this labor by continuing to improve their games and withstand any audience backlash. This activity bears important parallels to how new media companies have looked to harness crowdsourced and volunteer labor in general,²⁸ while also bearing similarities to the precedent of game producers profiting from the unpaid labor of game modding. In terms of modding, Julian Kücklich points out that part of what makes unpaid labor of modding so precarious is that the work "is veiled by the perception of modding as a leisure activity, or simply as an extension of play [...] leading, as it were, to a hybrid form of 'playbour.'"²⁹ Similarly, Ergin Bulut extends this attitude of playbor to the larger work of traditional beta testers and writes that "when play is regulated through time discipline and corporate priorities, testers' passion for games is inhibited" while testers are simultaneously "interpellated as subjects that consider work not as toil but as fun and passion."³⁰ When considering the larger implications of playbor and the diminishment or reconceptualization of value players add to a game through their passion and involvement, a discourse around reporting on bugs for a broken game constitutes a company reframing

²⁸ Hector Postigo, "American Online Volunteers: Lessons from an Early Co-Production Community," *International Journal of Cultural Studies* 12, no. 5 (2009); Tiziana Terranova "Free Labor: Producing Culture for the Digital Economy," *Social Text* 18, no. 2 (2000): 33-58.

²⁹ Julian Kücklich, "Precarious Playbour: Modders and the Digital Games Industry," *The Fibreculture Journal* 5 (2005): np, <http://five.fibreculturejournal.org/fcj-025-precarious-playbour-modders-and-the-digital-games-industry/>.

³⁰ Ergin Bulut, "Playboring in the Tester Pit: The Convergence of Precarity and the Degradation of Fun in Video Game Testing," *Television & New Media* Vol 16.3 (2015): 241.

controversy as a business opportunity. Whether players buy into this process or resist it then dictates the terms of the discourse surrounding a broken game.

With that said, there remains important ways in which this form of free labor stands in contrast to more institutionally established practices, occupying a curious middle ground in which developers may plan for general contributions from players but also work to solicit these reports on bugs as a part of an ad hoc response to a failed launch. Within this context, game producers would find it difficult to frame this work as “play”, as they would with traditional playtesters, given that players would be reporting on bugs precisely because their play had been thwarted by a game’s poor design. Even so, game producers can benefit from the temporary nature of the work, effectively deputizing their audience as playtesters until the developers can deliver on making a fully playable game. In this case, Ubisoft’s forum offers players a way to feel like they can help developers meet that promise and realize a game’s full potential, even as other players actively contest that proposed framework in the same space.

Ultimately, I call this process a perpetual update *culture* due to the way the negotiation of failure and reception shapes how an audience engages with digital media more broadly. The case of broken games prompts the question of whether players will accept a perpetual beta logic for a product that still bears the markings of a traditional commodity or resist the trends of digital revisionism. Of course, the platform that hosts this discourse can have a strong impact in shaping that discussion so I focus on Ubisoft’s official forum to show the ways a company attempts to curate that discussion and the varying degrees players can still express their own frustrations and agency within that framework. This audience discourse can then constitute a tenuous form of free labor and an affirmation of digital revisionism or a debate over the soul of the gaming industry.

Analyzing Ubisoft's Forum for the *Assassin's Creed* Series

To study the audience discourse for *Assassin's Creed Unity*, I chose to focus on Ubisoft's official forum to demonstrate how the company encouraged a highly mediated engagement with the text and navigated backlash through the space of online communication. For my methodology, I use an interface analysis model and close qualitative readings of user posts to consider how community management standards and the forum's digital affordances reinforce the dominant ideology of a perpetual update culture. With the interface analysis, I borrow from Mel Stanfill's (2015) writing on how platforms "structure action by making some things more possible than others."³¹ while also encouraging normative behavior through social valuation of these preferred actions. Similarly, I build from community management literature to outline how users form their own hierarchies on forums and coalesce around the stance of support or dissent based in part on how the forum community defines itself. To this point, Tarleton Gillespie asserts that forum moderation and guidelines not only demonstrate what discussions are allowed or prohibited but also "reveal the parameters and tensions faced by private curators of public free speech."³² With these considerations in mind, we can then look at how Ubisoft's forum attempts to acculturate its audience to support the company's hegemonic position by not only performing the role of free beta testing but also curating a discussion that largely supports Ubisoft's release even as moments of dissent creep into the overall discourse.

To gain an understanding of these interactions, I first looked through forum posts over the two-week period after the game's release. However, this timeline spanned over thousands of entries so I could not study each of them in close detail. Instead, I looked for general themes for

³¹ Mel Stanfill, "The Interface as Discourse: The Production of Norms Through Web Design," *New Media & Society* 17, no. 7 (2015): 1061.

³² Tarleton Gillespie, *Custodians of the Internet: Platforms, Content Moderation, and the Hidden Decisions that Shape Social Media* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2018), 73.

how users reported on errors, offered messages of support, or expressed their displeasure with the game. I then gathered a sample of the first one hundred and fifty posts, and all subsequent replies, that users published on the forum immediately following the game's release. This sample size allowed me to look at each post and its thread of replies in detail and to observe the tone of this discourse from its moment of origin. As for my analysis of each entry, I first considered whether a user was posting to report specific bugs and errors they experienced in game, to criticize Ubisoft and the broken game, to post unrelated or general questions, or to seemingly report on specific issues while using the opportunity to criticize the developer or the game (effectively repurposing the forum's guidelines). I likewise noted if Ubisoft or its volunteer moderators posted themselves in an attempt to update their users on their efforts to fix issues with *Assassin's Creed Unity* and marked which posts they chose to respond to and engage with. Beyond these classifications, I pulled quotes from posts that featured users arguing with each other over Ubisoft's business practices and the state of the game, users supporting each other by sharing potential fixes for errors and bugs, and users explicitly commenting on their frustrations with both the game and the larger trend of a perpetual update culture.

I believe that focusing on Ubisoft's own forum within the immediate moment of their failure provides a revelatory perspective on the larger trends involved with broken games and updating cultures. As other scholars have argued, moments of failure have the potential to reveal underlying ideologies of media and technology precisely because they are unintended and even counterproductive iterations of an intentionally seamless work of production.³³ Similarly, I believe we can learn a great deal about the ways in which a company negotiates that failure as it

³³ J. Jack Halberstam, *The Queer Art of Failure* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2011); Benjamin Mako Hill, "Revealing Errors," in *Error: Glitch, Noise and Jam in New Media Cultures*, edited by Mark Nunes (New York: Bloomsbury Academic, 2011).

attempts to use digital affordances to ultimately revise it. In studying the initial audience discourse on Ubisoft's official forum, we can highlight the larger tension involved between the gaming industry and its audience as both struggle to define the broader culture surrounding the perpetual update.

Controlling User Engagement with Broken Games: The Official Ubisoft Platform

To understand how *Assassin's Creed Unity*'s audience attempted to remonstrate with Ubisoft on their broken game, we must look at the ways that discourse *can* take place on Ubisoft's official forum. To begin with, the company's website frequently reinforces a link between players reporting on bugs and the developer improving the gaming experience. With all Ubisoft games, the company separates individual forums into two categories and includes a note on how these sub-forums should be used:

- General Discussion – directs players to discuss everything related to the game.
- Community Support – directs players to report any bugs you might encounter with the game.³⁴

Through this division and classification, the forum attempts to dictate the terms of player conversations around *anything*, effectively stripping the conversation of a specific direction like addressing a game's shortcomings, or around *support* and an optimistic approach on reporting game errors (Figure 3). Additionally, when Ubisoft's CEO Yannis Mallat released an official apology for *Assassin's Creed Unity* through the company's online newsletter, his statement not only created the impression that the audience's concerns had been heard but established a clear

³⁴ "Assassin's Creed Forum," Ubisoft, November, 2014, accessed December 15, 2017, <https://forums.ubi.com/>.

connection between players reporting on bugs and the developer improving the gaming experience:

We've been working hard to fix the problems players are reporting, and the patches we have released so far have resolved many of them. [...] In the meantime, please keep your feedback coming – it has been both humbling and incredibly helpful as we continue working hard to improve the overall quality of the game. We are hopeful that with these forthcoming updates, everyone will be able to truly enjoy their *Assassin's Creed Unity* experience.³⁵

This supposedly interdependent relationship was then reinforced by how Ubisoft officials and volunteer moderators communicated with its audience on the forum itself.

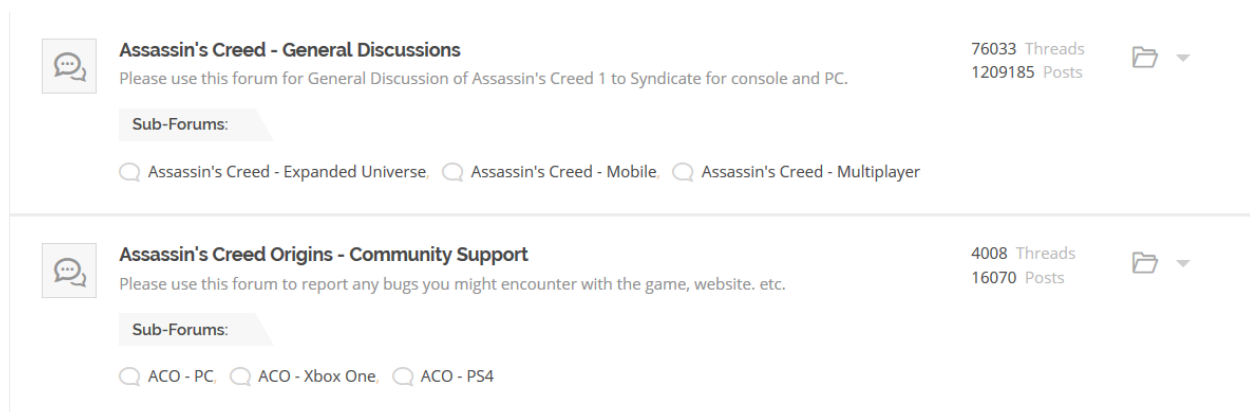


Figure 3

Three days after releasing *Assassin's Creed Unity*, a “Player Experience Manager” took to the Ubisoft forum to list “Current Known Issues” for the game across all platforms. This list included workarounds for bugs and glitches and a progress report that in almost all cases never updated past “WORKING ON IT” in all-caps and bright red font, as if to convey the urgency of the company’s work. Indeed, the only issues to have been fixed at the time of posting this list

³⁵ Yannis Mallat, “Newsletter,” *Ubisoft*, November 25, 2014, http://newsletter.ubisoft.com/en-gb/2014/11/25_ACUP3/25_ACUP3.html.

involved the company's micro-transaction system Helix Credits (Figure 4). While the post did at least directly address problems with the game, it is significant that the company chose to list this information in a closed thread, meaning that players could not comment on it and continue the discussion or ask clarifying questions about a series of technically complicated workarounds for game-ending errors. The only way a player *could* engage with the post was to use a "thumbs up" upvote or to share it on social media.

PS4 ONLY

- Game crash and users encountering error CE-34878-0 **WORKING ON IT** **WORKAROUND BELOW**
- The Workaround for this issue is to start the game in offline mode; this way the crash no longer occurs.

PC ONLY

- Can't launch the game - ACU.exe **WORKING ON IT** **WORKAROUND BELOW**
- Use the "verify files" option in Uplay
- Some Crashes might occur **WORKING ON IT**
 - Please reach out to our [support](#) to ask a question and get support

- Getting stuck when launching the game **WORKING ON IT**

Xbox1 ONLY

- Uplay members may get put in a 45s 'Please Wait' screen after passing the 'Press A' engagement on the screen before reaching the main menu **WORKING ON IT**
- Helix Credits issues.
 - Players are unable to view Catalog in the E-shop **FIXED**
 - Players cannot purchase Helix credits **FIXED**
 - If you do not receive your Helix Credits right away, fully exit out of the game, and restart your console.
 - If the issue persists, please contact [Customer Support](#).



Figure 4

The company also demonstrates its influence over conversations with the way admin responses to user posts show up in the sub-forum threads. Scanning through different posts on the forum, users occasionally find a Ubisoft logo beside a thread's title. When they hover the mouse over the logo, the words "Go to Ubisoft Response" appear on screen. This interface choice privileges moments of dialogue between players and the company, while once more foregrounding the idea that Ubisoft is addressing its audience's concerns. Nevertheless, the company was quite selective about when and how they responded to comments and their limited

dialogue with their audience tended to reinforce the position of a perpetual update culture. For example, in a post titled “AC:Unity major glitches,” user JustinR93 wrote “I just started playing after installing the day one patch and noticed a bunch of glitches within the first 15 minutes” and goes on to list several cosmetic bugs before ending his post on a positive note about “an otherwise amazing game.”³⁶ An Ubisoft “Community Developer” admin responded by taking the user’s gesture toward an “otherwise amazing game” and reframing within the company’s stance on digital revisionism:

Hi JustinR93, thank you for posting these. I will forward your post onto our support team so we can include these in our bug tracker. To your point, we are always looking to improve the experience and Launch is just the beginning.³⁷

Of course, JustinR93’s point was not that “Launch is just the beginning,” but that he wanted the game he paid money for to improve. Still, the user not only contributed to Ubisoft’s “bug tracker” but continued to frame the game in a constructive, positive light. The company’s response then acts to affirm these choices and even condition favorable norms on their forum and reward that conduct with a note acknowledging the player, which can make their audience feel heard and that they are contributing to making a game they feel passionate about better.

On the other hand, when players break these norms by voicing their frustrations with the game in ways that do not align with the perpetual update culture, admins largely remain silent. In a post titled “How do I get my REFUND?”, user TruePastorX writes:

³⁶ JustinR93, “AC:Unity major glitches,” *Ubisoft*, November 11, 2014, <https://forums.ubi.com/>.

³⁷ UbiJustin, “AC:Unity major glitches,” *Ubisoft*, November 11, 2014, <https://forums.ubi.com/>.

I want my money back. This game is unplayable. Please reply with the process I must use to get a complete refund of my nearly \$100USD (including season pass) No more chances ubisoft. I'm done.³⁸

Naturally, Ubisoft never responded because it was not in their interest to entertain the possibility of a refund. When the user continued to “bump” their thread asking for a response, other users began policing TruePastorX's conduct, writing “Why don't you contact customer support? This forum is for Technical Support.”³⁹ When TruePastorX replied that he had tried customer support and received a similar lack of responsiveness, he was then accused of being impatient. In a similar case, user garyfirtampa writes “this is complete bs paid 60 buks for the game xbox one another 30 bucks for the season pass and cant do nothing in the game.”⁴⁰ A user then playfully comments:

Wow, you are mad. So mad you forget punctuation. Kidding aside, they will get everything sorted eventually. [...] Also, make sure you open a ticket with support. That will help them track the issues and notify you when resolved.⁴¹

The absence of an admin's voice and the conflict between other users on the site reinforces Ubisoft's position for what a “Technical Support” sub-forum should be used for: telling the company how to fix their game. While many players resisted this normative model, the larger discourse still leaned heavily toward Ubisoft's favor.

By looking at a sample size of one hundred and fifty posts taken from the first two days following the game's release, ninety-three of these posts involved players using the forums to report on game ending error codes, graphic glitches or issues with the game's interface, network

³⁸ TruePastorX, “How do I get my REFUND,” *Ubisoft*, November 14, 2014, <https://forums.ubi.com/>.

³⁹ Anonua, “How do I get my REFUND,” *Ubisoft*, November 14, 2014, <https://forums.ubi.com/>.

⁴⁰ garyfirtampa, “Freaking mad a hell,” *Ubisoft*, November 12, 2014, <https://forums.ubi.com/>.

⁴¹ Diluant, “Freaking mad a hell,” *Ubisoft*, November 12, 2014, <https://forums.ubi.com/>.

connectivity issues, and their difficulty to download and install the game. These posts all involved specific issues on the game and direct requests for Ubisoft's help. Additionally, since Ubisoft's *Assassin's Creed* forum was technically open to all games in the series, the sample pool was further diffused with twenty-nine posts involving general or unrelated questions concerning topics like preorders, game settings, and past games that were still popular like *Assassin's Creed IV: Black Flag* (2013). A scant three posts originated from Ubisoft attempting to comment on the widespread errors in *Assassin's Creed Unity* and listing FAQs to attempt to resolve player issues, most of which ultimately involved leaving a ticket for customer support to be resolved at some indeterminate time in the future. Finally, the last twenty-five posts were either directly antagonist toward Ubisoft or effectively used a broad issue like poor framerate performances to complain more generally about *Assassin's Creed Unity*'s broken status.

Out of this sample, Ubisoft officially responded to thirty-one posts, and volunteer Ubisoft moderators responded to eleven more—usually without any concrete response to the post outside of a redirect to Ubisoft's customer support page. However, among those limited responses, Ubisoft only engaged with an overt critique of their development practices three different times and always in a generalized way, apologizing for a gamer's experience and providing a link to customer support. As for the posts that involved broader criticisms of Ubisoft's broken game and its development practices, there remained several tensions in terms of how users were able to express themselves. Most notably, Ubisoft had a troubling tendency of closing the threads on the posts that veered towards outright censure—an admin affordance not available to the larger community of users. Among these twenty-five posts, already a small percentage of the larger sample size, eight were marked as closed threads before a conversation between users could start. These posts typically presented themselves as overtly critical with their post titles,

including “Open Letter to Ubisoft,” “Congratulations Ubisoft, You’re The New EA,” “Still more issues. Seriously?,” “A Longtime Customer Who Is VERY Ticked Off,” and “Advice: Framerate Issues = Cancel that pre-order.” In these articles, users were still able to express their outrage and speak out against the company, in some cases comparing Ubisoft to the similarly maligned developer/publisher Electronic Arts or telling customers who pre-ordered the game in foreign markets that had yet to receive the game to cancel their orders. However, closing the threads ensured these negative conversation topics could not gain momentum and continue to surface at the top of the sub-forum with each new response (i.e. a forum ‘bump’).

When users did make it through this loosely constructed blockade, they could still face policing from other users who are more aligned with Ubisoft’s position. One way users apparently attempted to get around these obstructions, though, involved posting about an actual issue with gameplay but using that topic to make a broader critique. For instance, user LGalucard posted about not being load a game after it crashes, but ultimately concludes with “I can deal with buggy but not being able to play something i paid for is beyond infuriating.”⁴² Notably, though, LGalucard’s sentiment still suggests some level of acceptance of the perpetual update culture, a tolerance for bugs so long as they are within limits. In other cases, these posts outline the degree to which players note Ubisoft’s development practices and connect them to the broken status of their game. In another post from TruePastorX, the user connects *Assassin’s Creed Unity* to Ubisoft’s failed launch of *Watch Dogs* (2014) six months earlier, which “kept some players locked out of the game for nearly a month.”⁴³ Other users attempt to resolve their ambivalence of these practices through a more open discussion when possible. For instance, in a post called “was

⁴² LGalucard, “Cant load after crash,” *Ubisoft*, November 12, 2014, <https://forums.ubi.com/>.

⁴³ TruePastorX, “Still more issues. Seriously?,” *Ubisoft*, November 12, 2014, <https://forums.ubi.com/>.

I mistaken in buy AC Unity? (multiple problems),” user Rendra-SenseiZ_O seems to err on the side of supporting the game:

Now granted I think everything else in the game is beautiful and deserves a 10/10, but I really don’t wanna give this game a bad reputation simply because these problems are present [...] Hopefully these issues can be fixed soon because I’m getting really upset I can’t do missions with my friends.⁴⁴

Much like with LGalucard’s post, Rendra’s complaint allows for *some* problems with the game so long as they are resolved ‘soon’. However, in an inversion from the policing activity noted in other posts, a replying user suggests a more critical reading of Rendra’s complaint and highlights the perpetual update culture in the process: “we are beta testers who payed a retail price for an unpolished and unfinished broken game learn the lesson like i did, and for their next games remember this.”⁴⁵ Of course, this recognition of the user’s position as performing a beta test function for free remains rare but these moments of resistance against Ubisoft’s broader policies still find their way into the discourse, albeit in marginalized ways.

Finally, the forum’s playbor activity does not extend solely toward an exchange with Ubisoft but also takes place *between* users. In several posts involving specific errors, other users will respond with commiserations and potential fixes found through their similar experiences with the software. Instead of using the forum to hold Ubisoft accountable for their broken game, players actually take on the role of customer support through their shared experiences and help workshop potential solutions for different issues like how to download and install the game by resetting their internet connection or their console’s network settings. In some ways, these

⁴⁴ Rendra-SenseiZ_O, “was I mistaken in buy AC Unity? (multiple problems),” *Ubisoft*, November 12, 2014, <https://forums.ubi.com/>.

⁴⁵ Bigodon, “was I mistaken in buy AC Unity? (multiple problems),” *Ubisoft*, November 12, 2014, <https://forums.ubi.com/>.

responses help other players manage their broken games and work around Ubisoft's shoddy design. However, they still essentially support the game's release by continuing to play it and engage with workarounds through a kind of crowdsourced knowledge.

Conclusion

A year after *Unity*'s disastrous release, Ubisoft released a new title for the franchise, *Assassin's Creed: Syndicate* (2015), which faced a first week sales slump that Ubisoft executive Alain Martinez stated was "clearly impacted by what happened with *Assassin's Creed Unity*."⁴⁶ Even so, sales largely rebounded as word of mouth spread that the game did not share *Unity*'s broken status, and any lingering errors seemed to fall within an acceptable range of Triple-A developed titles. And while *Syndicate* would not reach the heights of *Unity*'s sales records—which topped over ten million units shipped due to the game's strong presale numbers—the next two entries in the franchise, *Assassin's Creed: Origins* (2017) and *Assassin's Creed Odyssey* (2018), would reach that mark, joining *Unity* as three of Ubisoft's most profitable releases to date.⁴⁷ Ubisoft has likewise positioned its most recent release *Assassin's Creed Valhalla* (2020) to help launch a new line of consoles for the PlayStation 5 and Xbox Series X. Looking at the prolonged success of the *Assassin's Creed* franchise, *Unity*'s seemingly catastrophic launch has had little long term impact as the company's rushed efforts to revise the game and control the narrative of its release paid off. That fleeting moment of distrust, though, suggests how messy digital revisionism can be even if producers hold far more power to dictate the terms of a game's evolving reception.

⁴⁶ Alain Martinez, quoted by Tom Phillips, "Assassin's Creed Syndicate Sales "Clearly" Impacted by Unity," *EuroGamer*, November 5, 2015, <https://www.eurogamer.net/articles/2015-11-05-assassins-creed-syndicate-sales-clearly-impacted-by-unity>.

⁴⁷ Mike Minotti, "Ubisoft Says 11 Games Sold Over 10 Million Copies Each in PS4/Xbox One Era," *Venture Beat*, May 14, 2020, <https://venturebeat.com/2020/05/14/ubisoft-says-11-games-sold-over-10-million-copies-each-in-ps4-xbox-one-era/>.

When viewed from a broader perspective, Ubisoft emerges from *Unity*'s initial failure unscathed as a perpetual update culture continues to develop around the contingent nature of both the game industry and, in truth, nearly all new media beyond it. Broken games then present a critical case in which audiences call the norms of digital change into question due to the extremity of the developer's reliance on future iterations of a text. These moments of backlash outline the larger rhetoric involved with revisionist updates but also call into question the efficacy of challenging new media production when the text itself can respond to criticism. Consider this: when a text is 'always improving' it is in some ways immune to audience resistance because backlash would indicate the lowest threshold of acceptance for market strategies and companies can appear to address these concerns while learning more about their audience.

Meanwhile, the appeal of a perpetual update culture has larger implications for the ways in which companies develop digital commodities. For example, when Facebook became embroiled in the Cambridge Analytica scandal they responded by incorporating a "privacy update" and Mark Zuckerberg emphasized the rhetoric of constant improvement in a joint blog post, writing "we've repeatedly shown that we can evolve to build the services that people really want."⁴⁸ Similarly, when Hewlett-Packard faced a controversy involving motion-tracking webcams that did not recognize black users they not only gave users ad hoc workarounds like adjusting brightness levels, but also released a corporate statement reading "as with all our products, we continue to explore refinements which help to optimize their use."⁴⁹ In these cases, the update becomes a producer's first and best line of defense for controversy because it not only

⁴⁸ Mark Zuckerberg, "A Privacy-Focused Vision for Social Networking," *Facebook*, last updated March 12, 2021, <https://www.facebook.com/notes/2420600258234172/>.

⁴⁹ Mallory Simon, "HP Looking Into Claim Webcams Can't See Black People," *CNN*, December 23, 2009, <https://www.cnn.com/2009/TECH/12/22/hp.webcams/index.html>.

frames mistakes as an inevitable part of digital refinement but also delineates audience outrage as a temporary response.

Naturally, attempting to control the narrative of controversy remains a delicate balancing act. But while the discourse around a broken game can persist, the broken game itself vanishes from public record as the company releases new patched updates. Through these changes, a company like Ubisoft can present audiences with a new version of their game as ‘future potential realized’ and help to reinforce the digital ideal of delayed satisfaction. As this happens across the industry over years—notably, with a recent resurgence of prominent broken titles like *Anthem* (2019), *Fallout 76* (2019), *WWE 2K20* (2019), and *Cyberpunk 2077* (2020)—game producers push audiences toward a growing acceptance of a gaming service model, in which the flexibility of updates allows producers to change titles at their whim. Critically, the discourse of audience frustration and free labor behind these revisions map tensions that remain open to contestation. But the fact remains that in our modern digital culture audiences often stand at the far periphery of these texts, while companies have far more power to decide the ways in which a digital text can be revised. So when a game falters at launch, the ethos of a perpetual update culture reveals itself as a robust and steadfast response to digital failure.

Chapter 4: Digital Revisionism | Audiences at the Periphery

The year was 1994—a moment in technological history marked by rapid change and new possibilities—and an interviewer asked software engineer Linus Torvalds, principal developer of the open-source operating system Linux kernel, if he would change anything if he had the chance to do it all again. Torvalds responded like a developer, emphasizing the constant ebb and flow of code work:

Well, considering how well it has turned out, I really can't say something went wrong: I have done a few design mistakes, and most of those have required rewriting code (sometimes only a bit, sometimes large chunks) to correct for them, but that can't be avoided when you don't really know all the problems.¹

Notably, this offhand remark about *not knowing all the problems* highlights a key distinction about open-source software: since Torvalds designed Linux to be open to other developers it could change to suit the needs of its audience with potentially endless innovations and contributions. As a point of contrast, in 2016 *Pitchfork* published an article with the headline “Kanye West Is Still Changing *The Life of Pablo*. Does It Matter?”² West had released the album as a streaming exclusive on the music subscription platform Tidal and then proceeded to endlessly tinker with his track mixes afterward and changed the product that users had already paid for. Each new update on Tidal then upturned the idea of the album being a final draft and the line between production and consumption blurred. To answer *Pitchfork*'s clickbait query: yes, that distinction mattered then and still does now.

¹ Linus Torvalds, Interview by Robert Young, “Interview with Linus, the Author of Linux,” *Linux Journal*, March 1, 1994, <https://www.linuxjournal.com/article/2736>.

² Jayson Greene, “Kanye West is Still Changing *The Life of Pablo*. Does it Matter?”, *Pitchfork*, March 16, 2016, <https://pitchfork.com/thepitch/1059-kanye-west-is-still-changing-the-life-of-pablo-does-it-matter/>.

In the three-decade span between Linux and *Pablo*, between the promise of digital technology and its evolving use, many media industries have remained in distribution limbo where they continue to reinforce old market logics of end-use products while also using the affordances of digital contingency when convenient. Meanwhile, the impact of this incongruity can be seen most clearly in the ways audiences experience these frequently updated media objects and create moments of dissonance in their receptions. In my first three chapters, I looked at how the game industry has harnessed digital change and made these affordances work for them, while alluding to moments in which audiences contest these practices and prompt media's negotiated use. Inevitably, though, push back against prescriptive or predatory business practices can seem fleeting and the stakes of digital culture evolve as more media industries cultivate constant engagement for online, expanded texts. Even so, there remains ways in which digital production is stubbornly unpredictable, open-ended, or malleable. In some cases, that unpredictability is confined to the producers' whims and lies outside of the audience's control—much like when one streams an album and finds that a week later they are listening to a completely different version of a song. But these changes can also occur alongside the industry's attempt to navigate audience reception and discourse, leading to a far more complicated discussion of influence on a changing text. In a microcosm, we can observe an indirect but powerful user agency over the text through moments of backlash and coordinated disruptions in reception. But when we shift the lens toward these negotiations, similar to what we observed in Chapter 3's discussion on perpetual update cultures, there remains ways in which the fixed nature of an industry's use of updates constitutes a kind of digital revisionism as an incremental, and sometimes glacially paced response to audience discord.

When audiences push back against game development practices, they can create moments of uncertainty for the text through that pressure as developers update texts with fine-tuned or wholesale changes to quell these complaints. While users have lost much of their direct agency over game changes due to either the emergence of proprietary platforms or the constraints of intellectual property law (Chapter 1), they still retain some influence from the periphery of the industry in moments of controversy. This chapter, then, seeks to highlight what we can learn from such moments when the audience finds itself able to influence a game's production in a meaningful way. How do users work to reject digital models and what creates these flashpoints of tension between the industry and its audience? What remains of a game that changes through updates and patches in the wake of controversy and vocal dissent? What can amplify these responses and make them a powerful contending force in media industries? And how does the idea of digital revisionism work as a long-term response to these short-term extremes? When digital distribution opens games up to revisions through new versions and patched content, this versioned design cannot be separated from an implicit or explicit tension between the producers and their audience. With each update and expansion, producers continue to manage audience desires while often pushing for aggressive business models—especially in modern triple-A and mobile game development. And that very process of altering the game, encapsulated in dense patch notes or effusive press releases, can provide us insight into a constant effort to redraw battle lines over a game's design as the industry sells these changes as progress.

I begin this chapter by reexamining the dissertation's larger argument on digital revisionism, outlining how the growing industry standard of revision not only applies to the ways game producers make changes to the digital game itself but also utilize these updates and expansions as part of a dynamic response to a game's reception. This use of digital revisionism

then becomes particularly pronounced in moments of audience backlash, in which a game's revisions act as a process of negotiation between the industry and its audience. To help underscore the implications of that broader perspective of digital revisionism, I consider the game industry's revised receptions within the larger context of audience and fan studies, detailing how audience agency helps to define this process of negotiation. In my proposed framework on reception studies, I am also invested in considering the audience beyond expressions of fandom, while acknowledging the intense engagement of fans remains an important concern, and I look to complicate our understanding of highly contentious audience discourses with recent work that considers audience *ambivalence*³ and expressions of *dislike*.⁴

While considering the broader complexity of volatile receptions and digital revisionism, I outline emerging trends in audience backlash, centering much of my attention on social media protests and coordinated user review bombing. I also contextualize these responses as part of a larger continuity of frustration in the gaming community surrounding the constant commodification of the gaming text. Finally, I draw these concerns together with my main case study on Electronic Arts' contentious release of *Star Wars: Battlefront II* (2017) and detail both the audience backlash surrounding the game's use of loot box mechanics and the chaotic update culture that resulted from the audience's persistent protests. With *Battlefront II*, EA first released the game in an open beta with a markedly predatory microtransaction system and randomized loot boxes for game upgrades. Gamers outcried these policies as a particularly pernicious 'pay to win' model, wherein you could gain advantages over fellow online players by funneling money

³ Whitney Phillips and Ryan M. Milner, *The Ambivalent Internet: Mischief, Oddity, and Antagonism Online* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2017).

⁴ Jonathan Gray and Sarah Murray, "Hidden: Studying Media Dislike and its Meaning," *International Journal of Cultural Studies* 19, no. 4 (2015); Jonathan Gray, *Dislike-Minded: Media, Audiences, and the Dynamics of Taste* (New York: New York University, Press, 2021).

into loot boxes to upgrade your online characters. As tensions grew and audiences rallied against these loot boxes in different online forums—including review bombing tactics and a turbulent Reddit AMA thread with the game’s publishers—EA blinked first and removed their loot box mechanics hours before the game’s official retail release. This initial upheaval led to months of speculation on the ‘final’ status of the game, while small scale changes and gradual expansions worked to realign *Battlefront II* with audience expectations.

Ultimately, I highlight the production history and audience reception of *Battlefront II* not to uphold a straightforward success story or offer platitudes about the audience’s ability to sway producers from predatory business models. Instead, I work to place this account within a broader history of digital gaming and a more comprehensive understanding about how momentary changes can lead to larger shifts of attitudes and user norms around new media. As I have argued with broken game development, at the core of these changes lies an instinct toward acculturation. Indeed, at this point in gaming history loot box mechanics had arguably reached a saturation point in the industry, just as broken development had in the years prior, and the *Battlefront II* controversy helped to mark the threshold at which audiences would accept these mechanics for a highly anticipated release. While this particular conflict was slowly resolved through multiple revisions and a shift away from purchasable game upgrades and toward more a commonly accepted system of loot box cosmetic upgrades, we should not lose sight of how these shifts allude to a potential for developers to reconfigure expectations both with future releases of a game and a swath of future games. Through their approach to digital revisionism, new media industries can use digital distribution and online discussions to construct a litmus test for what business practices audiences will currently accept. In the case of gaming, if loot boxes appear particularly egregious today, companies can slowly normalize these mechanics through the

constant push and pull of controversy, change, and reconciliation. In other words, media companies can lean into the instability of digital change to learn from their audience and cultivate a new standard of expectations even as that audience attempts to burn the foundation from which these practices derive.

Digital Revisionism: Taking the Long View on Turbulent Media Receptions

I consider the term digital revisionism as a twofold distinction between the process of revising a digital text and the attempt to revise the expectations and media cultures surrounding that text. In other words, cultural industry producers can use digital revisionism not just to update and expand on digital media itself but also harness new media's capacity for change to revise and finetune their approach to production and acculturate their audiences to new norms of consumption. In this description, I seek to demonstrate the persistent and political power of revision as a process that overwrites our experiences with media, challenges our ownership of media through designed contingency, and even works to redefine an industry's failings as temporary obstacles to media's future potential. However, the industry's use of digital revisionism as practice and rhetorical stance must also contend with the audience's own expectations and understanding of these changes. Within this context, the industry's enduring stance on digital revisionism amidst volatile receptions can reveal a larger struggle between industry producers and their audiences, as these texts change in direct response to the audience's backlash.

To establish this broader understanding of digital revisionism, my previous chapters have built on each other to show how the console industry's ability to change the digital game has had larger repercussions on surrounding gaming cultures. In some cases, the importance of digital change may lie in how console producers use the game platform's technology to monopolize

direct interventions on the gaming text, setting limitations and boundaries on console gaming's potential participatory cultures (Chapter 1). Meanwhile, the console industry's platform governance has led to broader innovations on the economic expansions of gaming, as producers work to increasingly tie DLC add-ons, virtual currencies, subscription services, loot boxes, and microtransaction systems to a game's mechanics and online play features (Chapter 2). With that said, I argue that we can understand the underlying mechanisms and industry logics of digital revisionism most clearly when the industry uses revisions and update cultures to confront their apparent failings or otherwise reinvent their media (Chapter 3). As we focus on controversial game receptions and the industry's ad hoc use of updating and expansions to effectively overwrite a game's reputation, I believe the full scope and scale of digital revisionism materializes as a site of contestation and negotiation on emergent industry practices and the norms of gaming culture.

By using controversy as a conceptual framework, I build on established studies on how errors, failure, and scandal can all help to reveal something essential about industry logics and media cultures.⁵ As I mentioned in Chapter 3, both errors and the broader concept of failure can highlight how technology and digital market practices work in part because they make intentionally seamless functions and practices visible through their breakdowns. Jack Halberstam further argues that failure has the ability to undermine the intentional successes of capitalism, as it not only reveals the logics of the market but also opportunities for its subversion:

⁵ J. Jack Halberstam, *The Queer Art of Failure* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2011); Benjamin Mako Hill, "Revealing Errors," in *Error: Glitch, Noise and Jam in New Media Cultures*, edited by Mark Nunes (New York: Bloomsbury Academic, 2011). Error; S. Elizabeth Bird, *The Audience in Everyday Life: Living in a Media World* (London: Routledge, 2003).

As a practice, failure recognizes that alternatives are embedded already in the dominant and that power is never total or consistent; indeed failure can exploit the unpredictability of ideology and its indeterminate qualities.⁶

While the errors or failures inherent to controversy may suggest insights into how the industry operates and even present alternatives to media's underlying ideological assumptions, the surrounding discourse of controversy also represents insight into an impassioned response from the audience. With this in mind, S. Elizabeth Bird's related writing on media scandals provides a useful guide to consider how controversy functions within a larger audience discourse. As Bird writes, "media scandals help set the agenda for discussion, but they do not exist as some definable text separate from the wider cultural conversation."⁷ Admittedly, controversial receptions may not carry the intensely moralized connotations of a scandal, but these discourses are likewise characterized by outrage or the audience's expression of dislike and help to inform a wider cultural conversation on what audiences care about. The industry's efforts to revise these moments of controversy through the prevailing rhetoric of updating and constant improvement then stands in contrast to the audience's outrage. Amidst these efforts to revise the text, the industry can then smooth over the jagged edges of failure and reaffirm the industry's dominant control over digital commodities.

Ultimately, though, digital revisionism is not solely an industry affordance, even when we consider the degree to which console gaming has pushed audiences to the periphery of the text itself. After all, audiences can use the knowledge that digital texts *can* change as a starting point to demand industry accountability and for the industry to revise these texts to better align with the audience's desires and expectations. Furthermore, while I argue that controversy is a

⁶ Halberstam (2011), 88.

⁷ Bird (2003), 44

useful framework to consider what it reveals about the industry and its audience, I *also* believe controversy has a more direct impact on how audiences can still influence gaming at the online fringes. To this point, both social media protests and user review bombing have emerged as effective audience strategies to take control over a game's reception and threaten the industry's economic bottom line. Still, I would caution that the larger process of digital revisionism still benefits the industry in part because of the one-sided nature of these digital changes. Audiences may demand patched updates for a broken game or digital expansions that deliver on a game's empty marketing promises and that demand may yield results, but the industry still controls when and how these digital changes happen.

More importantly, industry producers can use their ability to revise receptions to test the lines at which their customers will balk at microtransactions, empty or cheaply produced DLC expansions, poor quality assurance, or a number of other predatory practices and cost-saving measures. If players do protest, then the process of revision and damage control can begin. Moreover, each time game producers test the audience's threshold for these market practices, they can move the line in the sand further and further toward a new industry standard, as player outrage is threatened by complacency and resignation through sheer repetition. With that said, there remains no guarantee that audiences will simply forgive and forget amidst these controversies, so the industry must emphasize the promise and allure of a game's future potential while weathering the scorn of its present reception. The audience's fleeting resistance in these moments can then uncover the 'embedded alternatives' of failure, even as the game's updated revival works to retroactively, *eventually* ameliorate that backlash.

(Re)Framing Audience Agency

As media industry producers and their audience vie for influence amidst controversial receptions, audiences must first push back against a fundamentally imbalanced relationship within media consumption and reception, which has historically favored industry producers as hegemonic purveyors of media's value and meaning. However, audiences have always had their own agency within that lopsided dynamic, which helps to inform the ways in which they can assert that agency within moments where a media producer's control over media wavers. In early audience studies discourse, Stuart Hall makes a critical contribution to understanding that audience agency by establishing the foundation to consider interpretive frameworks. Hall breaks media consumption down into a process in which producers 'encode' media with inherent meanings and ideologies and audiences then actively decode that meaning using their own process of interpretation. He goes on to state that while audiences may still interpret a "dominant or preferred meaning" from an encoded text, that meaning is by no means prescribed or guaranteed:

We say *dominant*, not determined, because it is always possible to order, classify, assign and decode an event within more than one 'mapping'. But we say 'dominant' because there exists a pattern of 'preferred readings', and these both have the institutional/political/ideological order imprinted in them and have themselves become institutionalized."⁸

Through this analysis, Hall does not deny the producer's ability to partially frame the way a text is understood but rightly acknowledges that audiences have agency in the interpretation process as well.

⁸ Stuart Hall, "Encoding/Decoding," in *Media and Cultural Studies: KeyWorks*, edited by Meenakshi Gigi Durham and Douglas M. Kellner (Oxford: Blackwell, 2001), 172.

From this initial intervention, several scholars worked to reframe media audiences as active and capable of taking a media text and deriving their own personal meanings from it. In David Morley's ethnographic work on television audiences, he highlights how the differences in an audience's cultural background can influence the way they 'read' a television program and explains how audience members may reach different conclusions from a program while noting how these interpretations are still structured by the influences of class, political leanings, gender, and so on.⁹ Likewise, Ien Ang studies how audience receptions can create "a private and unconstrained space in which socially impossible or unacceptable subject positions, or those which are in some way too dangerous or too risky to be acted out in real life, can be adopted."¹⁰ In such cases, an audience's experience with media texts not only provides a framework for a multiplicity of readings but also, at times, a refuge for subversive and marginalized ideologies and means of expression. Critically, these overlapping meanings can then contradict each other, and producers can suggest a dominant reading for a media text only to have audiences reinvent the text's meaning through their reception. This tension becomes particularly important when we consider the way that digital distribution reopens a text to revision. Through the practice of digital revisionism, media producers can change a text to better suit an audience's desires or respond to failure and controversy, but they also gain more leverage to reassert dominant or preferred readings and, in the case of digital marketplace strategies, norms of consumption. In order to do so, though, producers must first acknowledge that the way an audience reads and consumes media goes beyond the purview of the producer's intentions.

The established norms of an audience's interpretive frameworks and negotiated readings can also have an influence on productions, as communities form around these texts. For example,

⁹ David Morley, *Television, Audiences, & Cultural Studies* (London: Routledge, 1992).

¹⁰Ien Ang, *Living Room Wars: Rethinking Media Audiences* (London: Routledge, 1996), 94.

in Janice Radway's study on romance novel audiences, she argues that the construction of the audience's interpretive framework "is itself governed by reading strategies [...] that the reader has learned to apply as a member of a particular interpretive community."¹¹ Radway further asserts that part of the community's pleasure in reading these novels involves actively interpreting the narrative as one that transforms the threat of male violence into a safe and loving relationship.¹² Most importantly, while this reading strategy still works within a patriarchal paradigm, the readers will reject the texts that lean too far into male violence or illicit sexual descriptions, which read more as what some writers *believe* women are looking for in these novels. As a result, a broader culture can emerge through the prolonged process of audience receptions of hundreds of titles and while the audience may not have direct control over the way these narratives take shape they do help to mark the boundaries on what is particularly acceptable or successful in the industry.

Radways' prescient insight that patterns of consumption help to define limited negotiations between audiences and producers likewise prompts us to consider how changes in a text's means of commodification can likewise suggest a threshold for what audiences may or may not accept. In the case of digital gaming, add-on content and microtransactions suggest a broader turn in the industry wherein gameplay takes on more commercial characteristics and audiences may attempt to reject these developments before they fully codify as norms. Similarly, broken game development likewise describes a moment of galvanized controversy in which audiences can, theoretically, choose to identify a company like Ubisoft or Electronic Arts as a developer that operates in bad faith by making empty or misleading promises for highly

¹¹ Janice Radway, *Reading the Romance: Women, Patriarchy, and Popular Literature* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1984), 11.

¹² *Ibid.* 75.

anticipated releases. In these cases, the audience's power could be defined by their ability to reject the text not just through their selective consumerism but through public outrage. And yet, this vocal and at times very visible displeasure with new industry standards must still contend with the industry's own ability to shape the narrative of a game's reception.

As audiences work to establish their agency within these contentious game receptions, emerging fan cultures further complicate how the industry may work to acculturate gamers to new norms in digital production. In some ways, fans of a particular game series can wield a great deal of influence as the industry works to align productions with fan interest and court a particularly engaged audience through their branding. Moreover, the discussion on power and audience agency lends itself to fandom well because the act of being a fan implies a form of ownership and intense engagement with a text outright. For example, Cornel Sandvoss described fandom as "the regular, emotionally involved consumption of a given popular narrative or text,"¹³ while Matt Hills argues that a "fan's appropriation of a text is [...] an act of 'final consumption' which pulls this text away from (intersubjective and public) exchange-value and towards (private, personal) use-value, but without ever cleanly or clearly being able to separate out the two."¹⁴ In both descriptions, the act of a highly emotional and personal consumption of the text marks a difference between fans and a more casual class of the audience but fans never fully escape their role as consumers within the media industry.

The ability for fans to take ownership over these texts has also faced significant challenges and limitations based on the evolving nature of digital platforms. When digital distribution first emerged as a powerful player in the cultural industries, fans could at times subvert their role as consumers and take ownership over texts through unsanctioned

¹³ Cornel Sandvoss, *Fans: The Mirror of Consumption* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2005), 8

¹⁴ Matt Hills, *Fan Cultures* (London: Routledge, 2002), 35.

appropriation. This appropriation aligns with what Henry Jenkins calls *textual poaching*, in which audiences make “meaning from materials others have characterized as trivial or worthless.”¹⁵ In this case, the literal poaching of media’s material components and their recontextualization provides fans an opportunity to imbue new meaning into media texts that they may have previously found wanting in some way. Jenkins would later complicate the reading on these unsanctioned moments of appropriation in his description of *convergence culture*, which details how media industries and audiences intervene in the same “expanding” and “broadening” digital spaces and both work to bring “the flow of media more fully under their control.”¹⁶ Jenkins also observes that “as they undergo this transition [toward a more convergent media], the media companies are not behaving in a monolithic fashion; often, different divisions of the same company are pursuing radically different strategies, reflecting their uncertainty about how to proceed.”¹⁷ While media companies routinely and historically take on different strategies as they attempt to capitalize on technological innovations and changing consumer trends, their uncertain approach also speaks to the inherent flexibility of digital media itself. In other words, the convergent affordances of digital media do not just allow for the text to be expanded or broadened but also allows for the text to be outright remade. Digital revisionism can then deepen the industry’s control over these technological affordances and disrupt the very balance that Jenkins describes.

When outlining the role of fandom in these receptions, it’s also worth detailing how digital media producers can harness audience engagement, prompting audiences to express that intense investment through free labor or otherwise aligning audience participation with the

¹⁵ Henry Jenkins, *Textual Poachers: Television Fans and Participatory Culture* (London: Routledge, 1992), 3.

¹⁶ Henry Jenkins, *Convergence Culture: Where Old and New Media Collide* (New York: New York University Press, 2006), 18.

¹⁷ *Ibid.* 19.

cultural industry's capitalist interests. In Chapter 3, I argued that media producers were able to take a failed reception and effectively repurpose audience hostility as ad hoc free labor for playtesting and quality assurance. Even so, the unintentional and even unpredictable nature of broken game development created unique circumstances for the way that labor was encouraged by the industry as a hasty effort to take back control over a game's reception and influence on the market. In contrast, the cultural industries have a much longer history of working to harness intense audience engagement from the outset of a media's commodity life cycle. In this case, it remains critical to consider how audiences have intervened in the media industries through online activity and have even participated with co-production practices, precisely because this activity can then be cultivated in particular ways through the user's engagement with online platforms.

In fan labor and co-creative practices, audience members are so invested in media that they actively seek to intervene in these spaces of production. However, changes in platform governance and media cultures have slowly placed limits on this kind of participation. In Axel Bruns' conception of the *produser*, or producing-user, he outlines how online affordances allowed audiences to upturn the more direct production chain between producer, distributor, and consumer:

Here, the user is no longer merely an end user of fixed products, but gains the ability (usually in a strictly limited, prescribed fashion) to alter the products purchased, according to the user's own preferences.¹⁸

If users have gained the ability to extend their use of a text through produsage, though, the industry has likewise adapted to these participatory practices. Bruns alludes to shift with his

¹⁸ Axel Bruns, *Blogs, Wikipedia, Second Life and Beyond: From Production to Produsage* (New York: Peter Lang, 2008), 11.

admission that user production is likely prescribed by different companies hosting these participatory activities and that these companies can “hijack the hive” by locking in “produsage communities for financial gain.”¹⁹ Similarly, Kristina Busse argues that “with the embrace of new business models of spreadable and collaborative networked culture, the danger to fan culture has become the co-optation and colonization of fan creations, interactions, and spaces rather than earlier fan generations’ fears of litigation and cease-and-desist orders.”²⁰ Chapter 1’s discussion on the level creator console game genre offers a specific instance in which these concerns come to fruition, as the game platform works to set boundaries around player participation. Moreover, when media producers hijack these communal spaces they can also use the fan’s desire to create as a means to renew their investment in the platform itself, as the act of participation becomes a feature of media’s perpetual commodification.

The cultural industry’s digital turn has not only changed the ways in which media can be commoditized but also how consumption increasingly becomes tied to the audience’s community formations. These overlapping concerns lead us to consider how digital communities can be purposefully interpolated into a commercialized context, where the distinctions between the audience commodity and the audience as a community elide. As Mark Deuze writes, “the way we understand ourselves and get to know others increasingly develops in the context of mediated environments, which loosens—but does not destroy—[...] the connection between self-formation and shared locale.” He further argues that “the emergence of all kinds of new and improved yet temporary and distanced communities [...] thus serves networked sociability and commercial viability at the same time” (Deuze 34). Much like with Bruns’ distinction of corporate interests

¹⁹ Ibid. 33.

²⁰ Kristina Busse, “Fan Labor and Feminism: Capitalizing on the Fannish Labor of Love,” *Cinema Journal* 54, no. 3 (2015): 112.

hijacking the hive of audience participation, Deuze details how sociability takes shape online, which can feed into corporate interests so long as media producers are savvy enough to shape platform affordances in ways that structure a specific kind of engagement. Similarly, Derek Johnson notes that even when fans use their apparent unity to express outrage or antagonism, they nonetheless must contend with the ways in which the community constraints of fandom can act as a means of governance within moments of audience dissent and backlash:

While besieged producers sometimes defend themselves in online fan forums, they also enjoy privileged means of answering challenges to their discursive, producerly authority. [...] Corporate producers intervene in the struggles of fan-tagonism by reasserting their productive dominance, reframing “normative” fandom within “proper” spheres of consumption.²¹

These considerations of normative behavior also coincide with an industry’s attempt to establish norms as well. As the game industry works to codify particular consumption norms and player behaviors, they can channel fan interest and engagement as a means to incentivize that proper alignment—for example, commodifying add-ons for a popular series and framing those expansions as further commitment toward the game as fan object.

While corporate producers have become more adept at cultivating beneficial modalities of audience participation, this remains a high leverage proposition particularly when considering the intense emotional engagement of fans. Furthermore, if we only discussed the intensity of fandom in reception studies, we would miss out on a more complete picture of how media receptions are shaped by a consistent, if not equal, exchange between producers and their

²¹ Derek Johnson, “Fan-tagonism: Factions, Institutions, and Conservative Hegemonies of Fandom,” in *Fandom: Identities and Communities in a Mediated World*, edited by Jonathan Gray, Cornel Sandvoss, and C. Lee Harrington (New York: New York University Press, 2007), 294.

audiences—especially in moments of distinct controversy that help to underscore the stakes of digital change in our media industries. To this end, Jonathan Gray and Sarah Murray broaden these considerations of audiences by shifting the attention of reception studies to also consider anti-fandom, textual hate, and dislike, writing that these attitudes may “reveal what *obstacles* audiences see in the mediascape.”²² Similarly, Gray has argued that audiences can use the negotiated grievances of dislike as a means to critically examine the media they consume and that “the anger of dislike [...] can be a powerful resource for uncovering reparative visions, yearnings for better ways, and silenced or quietened pains.”²³ To this end, we can consider the expression of dislike much in the same way that Halberstam considers the political potential of failure as a means to discover alternatives through the disruptive nature of media controversy and their short-lived industry crises.

Intense fan engagement and the broader framing of audience dislike both feed into controversial receptions as outrage can galvanize a seemingly disparate audience around a specific point of common concern. However, these moments of shared outrage and intense engagement require the catalyst of a pressing controversy to act as an organizing principle, particularly in order to have substantial influence on industry practices. Within the longer view of digital revisionism, the industry’s ability to weather outrage through incremental updating not only works as an immediate defense mechanism for controversy but can also ensure that the process of revision outlasts the audience’s more immediate demand for change. As these receptions extend into a longer purgatory of uncertain updating, the once organized audience may then fracture as heated controversy gives way to a more complex debate over how to value remade media and whether or not audiences should hold its earlier controversy against it.

²² Gray and Murray (2015): 362. Emphasis in original.

²³ Gray (2021), 217.

When we consider the longer view of digital media receptions, the audience's unified outrage and subsequent fracturing aligns with a more ambivalent conceptualization of online discourse and interpretative frameworks. Whitney Phillips and Ryan Milner classify online audience participation as a form of folkloric expression that carries a multitude of voices that can coalesce into a salient discourse but may also carry negotiations of meanings and attitudes, divergent opinions, trolling or purposefully ironic commentary, and any other form of participation that creates both fluid and concrete distinctions between normal and aberrant responses. Within this framework, we can observe how the thread of audience agency remains an important consideration even when we consider common ground found in fan communities and the transitory coalitions created in controversies. Phillips and Milner go on to write:

Ambivalence collapses and complicates binaries within a given tradition. Not just between normal and abnormal, but [...] between then and now, online and offline, and constitutive and destructive. Studies of ambivalence, in turn, can shine a light on the tangled, messy binary breakdown both precipitating and resulting from everyday expression.²⁴

Through highlighting ambivalence in discourses, I am particularly invested in thinking through how digital revisionism breaks down distinctions of temporality, though I would extend that breakdown not just between “then and now” but also between media's now and its speculative future. Within this collapse, the messiness involved with digital revisionism reveals not just what obstacles audiences perceive in media industries but also how they respond to these obstacles once they have been reworked or removed. To be clear, I do believe the audience's power to initiate these changes still holds the potential to challenge media industries and demand better

²⁴ Whitney Phillips and Ryan M. Milner, *The Ambivalent Internet: Mischief, Oddity, and Antagonism Online* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2017), 13.

practices. I simply argue that we need to contextualize that power as being both provisional and influenced in turn by the protracted uncertainty of digital revisionism.

Social Media Protests and Review Bombing: Player Dispatches from the Periphery

The history of digital gaming as presently described involves a tension wherein audiences must either accept new digital norms in order to continue enjoying video games as they have done in the past or to actively push back against these changes and deny the industry's efforts to further commodify gaming cultures. At the same time, the industry actively works to acculturate audiences to these digital market logics and harness audience participation and expressions of dislike or outrage as either opportunities for ad hoc free labor or even informal, post-release market testing that uses gaming's contingency to revise the audience's experience with media in real time. As Deuze, Bruns, and others point out, the social characteristics of online media cannot be easily separated from commercial contexts and imperatives. And yet, online spaces remain difficult to fully control or predict, especially when audiences go beyond the tightly controlled platforms of the newly online gaming consoles. As players are pushed toward the periphery of gaming and coalesce in broader online spaces, they can retain an ability to put pressure on the industry particularly where these divergent voices unify in moments of controversy to fully express their dislike and dissent.

While considering audience backlash and even outrage over the game industry's use of predatory market practices and digital revisions, we can view these moments of disruption within the same context of Radway's discussion on how interpretive frameworks influence whether an audience accepts certain standards from an industry and what the market can bear, outlining a more dynamic relationship between console producers and audiences. When audiences decry predatory loot box mechanics, microtransaction systems, broken games, patched balance

mechanics that change online play, or any number of other digital amendments to a game, the audience has agency to either accept these changes or decry the shifting landscape of digital gaming.²⁵ The players may not have a clear way to intercede on these console games directly, such as using player mods to subvert game industry norms, but they still have power as consumers. Within the last several years, the audience has developed two common strategies to wield that influence over the gaming industry while occupying a space at the online margins: social media protests and review bombing.

In the case of social media protests, gamers effectively co-opt the trends for social media movements that have thrived in recent years through a series of organizing structures pushing for social change.²⁶ For example, Black Twitter activists like #BlackLivesMatter and media industry activists from the #MeToo movement have innovated ways to use social media to highlight discussions on racial discrimination, police brutality, sexual violence and predation, and a number of other critical issues in our culture. As Meredith Clarke writes of Black Twitter, hashtag activism has “demonstrated that the Black digital presence is one that demands recognition by other users and the mainstream news media. Its individual users, personal communities, and thematic nodes contribute to a greater ability for a linked network of Black communicators to plead their own cause via digital media in a shared space with influence that is quantifiable through follower counts, tweets, and retweets.”²⁷ Similarly, Rosemary Clark argues that hashtag discourses create a “narrative logic [...] to produce and collect individual stories,”

²⁵ For more on controversies surrounding online game balance updates, see: Jan Švelch, “Resisting the Perpetual Update: Struggles Against Protocological Power in Video Games,” *New Media & Society* 21, no. 7 (2019).

²⁶ Deen Freelon, Charlton D. McIlwain, and Meredith D. Clark, *Beyond the Hashtags: #Ferguson, #Blacklivesmatter, and the Online Struggle for Offline Justice* (Washington D.C.: Center for Media & Social Impact, 2016); Rachel Kuo, “Racial justice activist hashtags: Counterpublics and discourse circulation,” *New Media & Society* 20, no. 2 (2018); Deen Freelon, Lori Lopez, Meredith D. Clark, and Sarah J. Jackson, *How Black Twitter and Other Social Media Communities Interact with Mainstream News* (Knight Foundation, 2018).

²⁷ Meredith Clarke, “Black Twitter: Building Connections through Cultural Conversation,” in *Hashtag Publics: The Power and Politics of Discursive Networks*, edited by Nathan Rambukkana, (New York, Peter Lang, 2015), 215.

which then “fuels its political growth.”²⁸ Building off of these descriptions, we can view social media as means to harness the full potential of controversy in part because the linked network and narrative continuity of these posts create a highly visible, highly legible representation of these feelings of dislike, outrage, and dissent.

By referring to online social movements like #BlackLivesMatter and #MeToo, I do not wish to conflate these causes with moments of gaming protests around issues like egregious microtransactions or broken game development. Instead, I bring up these historically influential hashtag movements in part because they demonstrate concrete examples of everyday netizens using social media to harness a conversation and push forward a unified agenda, which then frequently recirculate through news outlets as these social movements grow, reinforcing the movements’ goals and visibility. Through their leveraged discourse, social media activism, be it on Twitter or other digital platforms, provides a roadmap for broader audiences to use the same networked connectivity and the visibility of virality to confront institutions or industries in power over the issues they may care about. Furthermore, regardless of the scale or the consistency of that push toward online protest, there remains a great deal we can learn about how audience backlash and discord can work in the larger context of controversial receptions.

Faced with an industry in the midst of wide-sweeping digital change, players found moments in selective game receptions to address these changes, particularly when they felt the game producer’s efforts to capitalize on digital gaming crossed some unstated threshold and seemed particularly egregious. In Chapter 2, I analyzed *NBA 2K18* as a historical case study in part due to the first incorporation of the ‘MyNeighborhood’ online space that blended digital play with add-on purchases. These issues continued to plague later iterations of the *NBA 2K*

²⁸ Rosemary Clark, “‘Hope in a Hashtag’: The Discursive Activism of #WhyIStayed,” *Feminist Media Studies* (2016): 2.

franchise, to the point where the game became symbolic of a larger industry change as noted in *Kotaku*'s review headline for *NBA 2K19*: "*NBA 2K19* is a Nightmarish Vision of Our Microtransaction-Stuffed Future."²⁹ In an interview with *Trusted Reviews*, 2K Games' Senior Producer Rob Jones called virtual currency an "unfortunate reality of modern gaming" while defending the franchise's use of microtransactions:

Every game, at some point, in some way has currency and they're trying to get additional revenue from each player that plays the game. You know, the question has to be when does it feel like it's a straight money grab versus when does it feel like it's value added, right?³⁰

In this exchange, Jones frames the very threshold of audience acceptance that this larger dissertation has worked to observe. The question, at this point, would be whether audiences had a means to express that a game had fallen on the wrong side of the balance between 'added value' and 'money grab'. In this case, the audience's displeasure over the game's use of microtransactions needed a final push in the form of a broken release for a more unified protest to emerge.

When Virtual Concepts and 2K Games released *NBA 2K20*, the franchise had perfected its approach to microtransactions and online play but had published a broken game filled with bugs and online server crashes. During that game's reception, audiences reached a breaking point with the title and the hashtag #Fix2K20 trended on Twitter in the opening days of the game's release on the market. Still, the discourse on the game's reception not only centered on the

²⁹ Luke Plunkett, "*NBA 2K19* Is a Nightmarish Vision of our Microtransaction-Stuffed Future," *Kotaku*, September 11, 2018, <https://kotaku.com/nba-2k19-is-a-nightmarish-vision-of-our-microtransactio-1828954456>.

³⁰ Rob Jones, quoted by Trusted Reviews, "Microtransactions are an 'Unfortunate Reality' of Modern Gaming, says NBA 2K19 Producer," *Trusted Reviews*, December 3, 2018, <https://www.trustedreviews.com/news/microtransactions-unfortunate-reality-modern-gaming-says-nba-2k19-producer-3550636>.

broken game development but also the trenchant microtransaction systems that had plagued the franchise for years. In fact, players frequently used the hashtag to suggest a correlation between the two issues, with one user tweeting “they focus on microtransaction schemes more than the gameplay and features”, and another similarly writing “where do you think the effort went? they really do squeeze the sport fans dry, dont buy these games”.³¹ Taking cues from these social media protests, game journalists were keen to point out an entirely different correlation between the game’s maligned status and its use of microtransactions:

Many of these [bug and error] issues are, unfortunately, standard for new online games.

[...] Still, that doesn’t mean that 2K Games can ignore #Fix2K20. *NBA 2K20* has a heavy emphasis on microtransaction spending, and no one is going to spend extra money on the game if it’s not working properly.³²

By using the affordances of social media and trending hashtags, players could reorient the discussion around a new release and use that protest not only to suggest their disdain for the company’s production practices but also exert real influence on the communal aspects of online play, which the series had continued to commoditize through its use of microtransactions. So long as the hashtag continued to trend, players could remind each other to abstain from playing the game until they received a better version through an eventual update. The success for that protest may be difficult to quantify, and would likely be fleeting after a game patch addressed the more surface level concerns of bugs and errors, but at the very least the game’s reception could not be divorced from that moment of player outrage.

³¹ Bryan Wiedey, “Bug-Filled ‘NBA 2K20’ Launch Causes #Fix2k20 to Trend on Twitter; Here are the Biggest Complaints,” *The Sporting News*, September 11, 2019, <https://www.sportingnews.com/us/nba/news/nba-2k20-launch-fix2k20-twitter-biggest-complaints/1gzg1dedlzyhf1x3tucadwsgp9>.

³² Jeff Grubb, “NBA 2K20 Fans Ignite #fix2k20 Campaign Following Shaky Launch,” *Venture Beat*, September 9, 2019. <https://venturebeat.com/2019/09/09/fix2k20-nba-2k20/>.

While social media protests allow players to dictate a degree of influence on a game's reception, review bombing practices can work to dissuade players more directly from buying a game to begin with. In this practice, audiences take advantage of online user review functions and consolidate their efforts to drag the review score down. In some cases, these review bombing campaigns are actively planned. In other cases, they seem to accumulate momentum as user reviews pile in, offering a more improvised but still unified expression of the audience's displeasure. For either case, though, review bombing is precipitated by a broader catalyst in gaming culture. Consider one high profile example of the practice—in 2017, *Firewatch* (2016) game developer Campo Santo filed a DMCA (Digital Media Copyright Act) takedown notice against the popular YouTube creator PewDiePie for all streamed content of his game. Santo made this request in direct response to PewDiePie uttering a racial slur during a livestream of *Player Unknown Battlegrounds*, effectively using the claim of copyright infringement as a means of protest. In response, fans of PewDiePie flocked to *Firewatch*'s page on the Steam online marketplace and drove down the game's user reviews, which shifted recent reviews from "Very Positive" to "Mixed" within days. The organizing principle for the audience's retaliation could then be seen in a number of comments for these newer reviews: "at least one of the game devs seems to be a DMCA abusing SJW crybaby who is using copyright laws to wrongfully take down videos if the reviewer uses a word he doesn't like."³³ Notably, while these audience efforts were clearly reactionary and contained a great deal of regressive and chauvinistic commentary, they nevertheless constituted an effort to influence gaming producers, much in same ways that

³³ Andy Chalk, "Firewatch is Getting Review-Bombed on Steam," *PC Gamer*, September 12, 2017, <https://www.pcgamer.com/firewatch-is-getting-review-bombed-on-steam/>.

conservative audiences used *Rotten Tomatoes* to review bomb *Star Wars: The Last Jedi* (2017) and challenge what they viewed as overly progressive, ‘woke’ casting and writing.³⁴

Perhaps due to the high visibility and political nature of these cases, online platforms like Steam and *Rotten Tomatoes* have curtailed these protests through changes to their platforms and even through the direct intervention of deleting reviews classified as part of a larger review-bombing effort. *Rotten Tomatoes* removed pre-release comments for films entirely after *Captain Marvel* was similarly review-bombed before its release (based on complaints not only for the gendered casting of the Marvel film but on politically-charged comments from star Brie Larson).³⁵ Steam, on the other hand, created a ‘histogram’ view of its user reviews where the temporality of review-bombing could be viewed alongside the larger timeline of reviews for the game, revealing a “temporary distortion of the review score”.³⁶ These mechanisms worked to thwart review bombing’s visibility and its affective appeal, and certainly these cases may warrant some unease, but it’s worth pointing out that while review bombing has become notorious as a tool for conservative online audiences, it remains a practice that carries the political connotation of whatever protest it is ultimately used for. After all, players have just as easily used review bombing to call attention to the very issues of digital change at the heart of this dissertation, such as when audiences review bombed *Assassin’s Creed Unity* (2014) for its broken game development within days of its release (see Chapter 3). In other words, online protests can have a multitude of political aims and can even contain a multitude of motivations within the same

³⁴ Julia Alexander, “Star Wars: The Last Jedi is Being Review-Bombed on Rotten Tomatoes (Update),” *Polygon*, December 21, 2017, <https://www.polygon.com/2017/12/18/16792184/star-wars-the-last-jedi-rotten-tomatoes-review-bomb>.

³⁵ Julia Alexander, “Rotten Tomatoes Tackles Review-Bombing by Eliminating Pre-Release Comments,” *The Verge*, February 26, 2019, <https://www.theverge.com/2019/2/26/18241840/rotten-tomatoes-review-bomb-captain-marvel-star-wars-the-last-jedi>.

³⁶ “User Reviews,” *Steam*, September 19, 2017, <https://steamcommunity.com/games/593110/announcements/detail/1448326897426987372>.

review bombing campaign. Drawing from Phillips and Milner's framework on ambivalence, these contradictions can then help us understand not only the ways in which audience's protests can coalesce but also the challenge and even unpredictability of harnessing controversy as a pointed shift in a game reception's narrative.

Ultimately, social media movements and review bombing constitute a broader effort for audiences to test the boundaries of their influence on media industries in an increasingly complex online environment. In a study on the online backlash that followed a *Fox News* segment falsely claiming *Mass Effect* was "full interactive digital pornography", Nathan Dutton et al. studied a variety of responses including concerted review bombing practices and a deluge of critical comments on both *YouTube* and *Kotaku*, writing:

These events indicate a growing awareness among fans of not only their potential influence, but also the multiple ways they can choose to express themselves. [...] While certainly not all fan responses were so carefully considered, it does suggest a growing savvy among fans as to their 'niche market' status, as well as the impulse from some fans to reach out to other groups, and explain their position.³⁷

The authors observed these efforts emerging back in 2008 and the practices have only grown more organized, impactful, and 'savvy' as the years have pressed on. Still, if audiences can use these strategies to influence our cultural industries, it remains to be seen how lasting that influence can be and what obstacles remain for creating sustainable reform. We must consider the fact that while the industry may change based on outside pressure, it alone holds the capacity

³⁷ Nathan Dutton, Mia Consalvo, and Todd Harper, "Digital Pitchforks and Virtual Torches: Fan Responses to the Mass Effect News Debacle," *Convergence: The International Journal of Research into New Media Technologies* 17, no. 3 (2011): 299.

to *further* change our media experiences through updates and expansions long after the din of controversy has subsided.

To understand the dynamics of digital revisionism and the fleeting, but nevertheless critical, influence of audiences on that process, the remainder of this chapter will focus on a moment in the game industry where audiences found themselves possessing far more power than usual to impact a game's release and protest the industry's adoption of pay-to-win mechanics. Specifically, I study the controversial reception and digital revisionist practices of Electronic Arts' *Star Wars Battlefront II*. During the game's high profile semi-open beta that preceded its release—likely used for both informal market testing and to build anticipation for the game—players expressed outrage over a microtransaction-based loot box system that fed into online gameplay upgrades. In other words, the online shooter proposed a system in which players paid money for randomized loot boxes that had a chance to contain gameplay upgrades that would give them competitive advantage in online matches. In the following analysis, I study the game's turbulent reception as players protested the game's loot box mechanics and forced the industry's hand as it folded to audience pressure and revised the game within hours of its release by removing the game's loot box system without a clear replacement in mind. Additionally, my study will consider the longer view of digital revisionism, noting how the game languished in update purgatory for months while slowly attempting to reinvent itself and regain its audience, all while resuscitating a variation on the game's use of loot box add-ons.

The Force Awakens: Electronic Arts Navigates their Loot Box Controversy

To outline the complexity of digital revisionism as a form of revised discourse, I examine the volatile reception of *Star Wars Battlefront II* through close textual analysis of online game publications, *Reddit*'s online forum, social media posts, and user reviews on the aggregate

review site *Metacritic*. Additionally, I mark a distinction within my analysis concerning *Battlefront II*'s immediate backlash and the game producer's efforts to revise that controversy through updates and press release mea culpas. Throughout this analysis, I place particular emphasis on two distinct online strategies that best represent the audience's ability to take firm control over the game's discourse: the trending discussion surrounding a particularly disastrous *Reddit* AMA session and the audience review-bombing of *Battlefront II* on *Metacritic*. By using these two moments of contentious online discourse to create an outright scandal over the game's proposed loot box system, audiences became a pronounced threat to the game's economic viability and may have even tarnished the *Star Wars* franchise brand. And yet, as producers used updates to revise the game in response, controversy ultimately gave way to a far more ambivalent discourse on renewal.

The controversy surrounding *Star Wars Battlefront II*'s critically began before the game was ever released to a larger public. In the weeks leading up to the game's official release, Electronic Arts' developer subsidiary EA DICE had published a semi-open beta for online gameplay in order to smooth out coding and balance issues and garner online buzz for the title. The beta's use of loot boxes and hero and villain cards then implied that EA intended to use microtransactions to influence *Battlefront II*'s gameplay itself, which the company later confirmed. Specifically, the loot box system would allow players to pay for randomized gameplay upgrades, which could then give them specific advantages over their fellow users based on how much additional money they had sunk into the game. They could also pay to play *Star Wars* heroes and villains like Luke Skywalker, Darth Vader, Boba Fett, Rey, and Kylo Ren among others, which likewise presented players with significant advantages over the more generic Rebel and Imperial avatar classes.

As Electronic Arts used loot box mechanics in concert with a *pay to win* digital business model, they cribbed a common mobile gaming strategy perhaps best exemplified by the industry's *gacha* genre that uses loot box mechanics to structure randomized character summons—complete with low, opaque summoning odds on higher graded characters. Similar pay to win distribution models have had a more checkered history on console platforms but EA seemingly relied on the affective appeal of the *Star Wars* brand to sell users on its incorporation in online console play (i.e. *Star Wars* fans may want to play as Han Solo so much they will pay even more for the opportunity to do so). Whatever may have lied behind the developer's presuppositions, though, the audience very clearly pushed back against these practices. In part, we might interpret the audience's impassioned response as a product of the *Star Wars* fandom, as Electronic Arts' crass commercialization of a beloved brand may have incensed a particularly established and vocal fan base. If so, the proposed value that fans would place on this franchise and its characters may have backfired for the game's producers. With that said, I personally believe there's a larger issue at stake in the audience's rejection of a pay to win model for a highly anticipated online game release—namely, the rejection of a perceived instance of cheating. At this point in the console development, loot box mechanics had been popularized in Blizzard's massively successful *Overwatch* (2016) and had been incorporated in games like *Middle-earth: Shadow of War* (2017) and *Forza 7* (2017) to far less rabble-rousing from their respective audiences.³⁸ Despite this growing industry precedent, *Battlefront II*'s attempts to directly tie these loot boxes to online gameplay seemed to have violated gaming social norms that other companies had previously left undisturbed by either confining their loot boxes to

³⁸ Note: While I say *less* rabble-rousing, I don't mean to say there weren't any complaints on these other loot box systems at all. For example, see this *Kotaku* column on audience pushback for *Shadow of War*'s loot box system: Patricia Hernandez, "What You Need to Know About *Shadow of War*'s Controversial Loot Boxes," *Kotaku*, October 9, 2017, <https://kotaku.com/what-you-need-to-know-about-shadow-of-wars-controversia-1819293793>.

cosmetic skins or gameplay upgrades on single-player campaigns. The console's surrounding culture of challenging online play and the inherent values of skilled competition would then diverge from mobile gaming cultures in which pay to play structures have often thrived.

As I discussed in Chapter 2, I believe there are distinct ways in which the console industry's use of DLC, in-game economies, and microtransactions co-developed along with innovations in mobile gaming. Regardless, the two industries still have distinct differences in gameplay expectations, which would influence the degree to which audiences may accept a game's use of digital market strategies. As Jesper Juul outlines, the rise of mobile gaming coincides with a broader industry push toward casual game development, defined by "high usability, high interruptibility, and lenient difficulty/punishment structures."³⁹ The developer's use of a pay to win upgrade system can then benefit from the casual framing as the expectations around the game's high usability and high interruptibility undercut the stakes of online competition and the potential animus of users unwilling to buy into the casual game's microtransaction system. On the other hand, console game's online play places a much higher premium on the individual player's skill, particularly within the first and third-person shooter genres. In this case, we might consider the traditional challenge of online play on the console systems within the context of what Patrick Jagoda calls a sociological consideration of a game's mechanical difficulty, which accounts for "the constitution of digital gaming publics."⁴⁰ Considering the gaming public's established expectations, the difficulty of facing other skilled players online could represent a necessary challenge and substantiate the value of these games to begin with.

³⁹ Jesper Juul, *A Casual Revolution : Reinventing Video Games and Their Players* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 2009), 54.

⁴⁰ Patrick Jagoda, "On Difficulty in Video Games: Mechanics, Interpretation, Affect," *Critical Inquiry* 45 (2018): 206-207.

By contrast, the nature of pay to win loot box mechanics undercuts the inherent value of skilled play and recontextualizes competitive advantage as an advantage of the player's capital investment. In this case, players may view the surrounding culture of a pay to win online space as one that violates the expected and tacitly agreed upon rules of online gaming. The controversy surrounding *Star Wars Battlefront II* may then lie, in part, with a challenge to whether these upgrades represent an unfair element of cheating or manipulation. Mia Consalvo frames cheating as an ambivalent practice defined by the context of both the game and its audience, writing:

If cheating is situated, it can only come into being through active engagement with a game and other players, which suggests players are constantly being confronted with more and less meaningful choices regarding how to play a game.⁴¹

The tension involved with reading cheating or manipulation into a game's pay to win mechanics belies a larger debate on what players may consider fair play and what the game itself allows. Consalvo also observes that many players consider cheating "as only existing in relation to another player," and further describes that cheating as "the introduction of deception and possibly chaos into the game world."⁴² With *Battlefront II*'s proposed loot box mechanic, the game would then separate into a tiered experience between those who had spent money to beat the loot box gambling odds and those who had not—a form of chaos in the gaming world if there ever was one.

As the game's potential audience slowly came to terms with the economic implications of *Battlefront II*, they took to online forums and social media to express their displeasure with the situation. In one notable case, a Reddit user complained about the fact that the initial price point for purchasing Darth Vader was eighty dollars. A representative from EA responded to the

⁴¹ Mia Consalvo, *Cheating: Gaining Advantage in Videogames* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 2006), 127.

⁴² Ibid. 91-92.

thread and emphasized the company's ability to change these prices based on user feedback, writing that "we're looking at average per-player credit earn rates on a daily basis, and we'll be making constant adjustments to ensure that players have challenges that are compelling, rewarding, and of course attainable via gameplay."⁴³ Users did not warm to EA's reassurances though, and the company's response quickly became the most downvoted comment in the history of Reddit's platform with a current tally of over 683,000 downvotes.⁴⁴ In fact, EA's attempt to interact with its audience provoked such a negative response that Reddit's moderators had to lock the thread and issue the following statement:

The amount of spam, vulgar comments, and harassment going around is more than the Moderation Team – a volunteer team of 10 people – can handle. [...] Feel free to downvote or upvote any comment that you please, but the thread is staying locked.⁴⁵

As the controversy gained more visibility online, *Battlefront II*'s potential audience looked to cancel preorders for the game en masse, tied up Electronic Arts' customer service phone lines,⁴⁶ petitioned LucasArts to revoke EA's *Star Wars* license,⁴⁷ and caused enough of a stir that mainstream news organizations like *CNN*, *The Wall Street Journal*, and *The Washington Post* reported on the backlash alongside a bevy of video game journalists and fan sites.

⁴³ EACommunityTeam, "Seriously? I paid 80\$ to have Vader locked?," *Reddit*, November 2017, https://www.reddit.com/r/StarWarsBattlefront/comments/7cff0b/seriously_i_paid_80_to_have_vader_locked/dppum98/.

⁴⁴ Note: Several years later, EA's comment still holds the record as the most downvoted *Reddit* comment of all time. The stated reason: "ripping people off, then brigade". The far flung second place comment belongs to a user who asked to be downvoted. See: "Downvoted – List Of Comments," *Reddit*, accessed June 29, 2022, <https://www.reddit.com/r/ListOfComments/wiki/downvoted>.

⁴⁵ Potatoslayer2, "Seriously? I paid 80\$ to have Vader locked?," *Reddit*, November 2017, https://www.reddit.com/r/StarWarsBattlefront/comments/7cff0b/seriously_i_paid_80_to_have_vader_locked/.

⁴⁶ MIX, "EA Removes Battlefront 2 Refund Option as Gamers Cancel Pre-orders En Masse (Update: False Alarm)," *The Next Web*, November 14 2017, <https://thenextweb.com/gaming/2017/11/14/ea-battlefront-2-refund-remove/>.

⁴⁷ Note: the petition received over 200,000 signatures before it closed. See: John Hunt, "Lucasfilm: Revoke EA's Star Wars License," November 2017, <https://www.change.org/p/lucasfilm-revoke-ea-s-star-wars-license>.

In the face of this strong audience reaction, Electronic Arts used the affordances of digital distribution to remove all microtransactions from the game hours before its official release. However, the loot box mechanic remained in place and users simply could not purchase in-game credits to gain additional loot boxes. Not surprisingly, game critics struggled to make sense of *Battlefront II*'s gaming experience as it was released to the public at a point of crisis and uncertainty. In these reviews, some writers admitted *Battlefront II* had exhilarating moments, but many could not overlook the gameplay imbalances and crass commercialism behind its loot box mechanics. *Kotaku*'s Heather Alexandra captured this ambivalence well in the opening lines of her review:

Star Wars: Battlefront II frustrates me in ways I never knew I could be frustrated. It is both a lovingly crafted companion to the films and a tangled mess of corporate meddling.⁴⁸

Meanwhile, after the game's developers put the sudden freeze on microtransactions hours before the game's release, many authors scrambled to reassess the game based on last minute updates and speculate on whether these changes would become permanent features. As *Forbes*' Dave Thier put it, "I'm really not sure that reviews can quite capture what progression in *Star Wars: Battlefront II* will look like next week, let alone in 2018."⁴⁹ As Thier's commentary suggested, Electronic Art's sudden adoption of a digital revisionist stance would then send the game into a protracted months-long period in which the developers slowly worked to reinvent their game's online progression system.

⁴⁸ Heather Alexandra, "*Star Wars: Battlefront II*: The *Kotaku* Review," *Kotaku*, November 17, 2017, <https://kotaku.com/star-wars-battlefront-ii-the-kotaku-review-1820477183>.

⁴⁹ Dave Thier, "Star Wars Battlefront 2' Reviews Are in a Very Weird Place," *Forbes*, November 16, 2017, accessed May 8 2018, <https://www.forbes.com/sites/davidthier/2017/11/16/star-wars-battlefront-2-reviews-are-in-a-very-weird-place-right-now/#1c1fb848bb73>.

Throughout this process, Electronic Arts faced the looming specter of poor sales, pressure from Disney executives concerned with how the game's controversy "reflected on their marquee property,"⁵⁰ and accusations that the loot boxes would have constituted a form of illegal gambling. Moreover, both EA and the various companies associated with *Star Wars* continued to frame changes to the game as a growing dialogue between the producer and consumers. When questioned about the controversy, a Lucasfilm spokesman stated "Star Wars has always been about the fans [...] That's why we support EA's decision to temporarily remove in-game payments to address fan concerns."⁵¹ And when EA eventually overhauled its progression system, it positioned these changes as a validation of its players' concerns, writing on the game's website that "we have completely reworked the progression system based on your feedback in order to create a better game for all our players."⁵² Consequently, the outrage over EA's plans for the game had real and lasting consequences on the text players eventually received. Even so, when we contrast the discourse surrounding the players' more immediate protests with the eventual revision of *Battlefront II*, the process of digital revisionism reveals a far more complex picture of how these changes ultimately take place in the game industry.

Concerted Outrage and Negotiated Revision - The Shades of *Star Wars Battlefront II*'s

Discourse

When we isolate *Battlefront II*'s volatile reception as a narrative that leads up to Electronic Arts' decision to remove its loot box mechanics and send the game into update limbo, we easily see the power that gaming audiences can still exert on the industry solely through the

⁵⁰ Gene Park, "How a Star Wars Video Game Faced Charges That it was Promoting Gambling," *The Washington Post*, November 18 2017, https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/comic-riffs/wp/2017/11/18/how-a-star-wars-video-game-faced-charges-that-it-was-promoting-gambling/?noredirect=on&utm_term=.312bd984f2e6.

⁵¹ Ibid.

⁵² "Star Wars Battlefront II: The Progression System Update," *Electronic Arts*, accessed May 8 2018, <https://www.ea.com/games/starwars/battlefront/battlefront-2>.

visibility of controversy and their pointed expression of dislike. Notably, that expression of dislike was first foregrounded before the game was released as EA's developer subsidiary EA DICE hosted a contentious *Reddit* AMA (Ask Me Anything) to connect with their audience and address the game's controversy head on. However, *Reddit*'s AMA format critically foregrounded user questions, leading to an intense pile on as users directly interrogated the game's producers over their loot box mechanics and undercut their attempts to establish a dialogue by consistently reframing the company's responses as commercialized spin and burying them in a flood of comments and downvotes. For instance, design director Dennis Brännvall answered a question about possible revisions by insisting that "there's not much in the game that we wouldn't revisit to improve [it] for as many players as possible."⁵³ User wellyesofcourse then responded in all-caps "THEN REMOVE THE PAY TO WIN ASPECTS OF THE CRATE SYSTEM. PERIOD,"⁵⁴ followed by another user who playfully responded that the company would "rather remove the Star Wars part than the P2W [Pay to Win]."⁵⁵ Notably, the user comments reinforce a belief that EA cared far more about *Battlefront II*'s profitability than honoring the franchise property or creating a compelling game. It's worth highlighting, though, that this critical commentary happens within the context of the developer claiming they can 'revisit' changes to the game, opening the text up to a revisionist stance.

In later dialogue on the AMA, the developers likewise tied the idea of listening to the audience and proposing changes as a means of reconciliation. On a question about mending the relationship between players and the company, producer Paul Keslin wrote that "jumping into

⁵³ WazDICE, "Star Wars Battlefront II Dice Developer AMA," *Reddit*, November 2017, accessed May 8 2018, https://www.reddit.com/r/StarWarsBattlefront/comments/7d4qft/star_wars_battlefront_ii_dice_developer_ama/dpv8e58/?context=3.

⁵⁴ wellyesofcourse, *Ibid*.

⁵⁵ Valanga1138, *Ibid*.

this AMA is just one of the ways we want to start to repair the bridge to our players.”⁵⁶ Some users then playfully responded by reframing this statement within the context of microtransactions. Mtenuy1 wrote “EA Shields can not repel posting of this magnitude. That is of course if you buy the “Shield Penetrating DLC.”⁵⁷ Another user played into the comment by asking “Will it also give me a sense of pride and accomplishment?” and the original poster wrote “for \$9.99 It will!”⁵⁸ Notably, these instances of contentious discourse happen as EA DICE purposefully responds to players writing more earnest appeals for the company to change the game—not unlike how Ubisoft chose to respond to players embracing a perpetual update culture on *Assassin Creed Unity*’s official forum (Chapter 3). However, *Reddit*’s social media-influenced affordance of upvoting and downvoting comments shifted the overall tenor of the discussion and consolidated the AMA as a form of user protest. The larger audience’s act of downvoting EA DICE’s official responses further isolated the company from *Reddit*’s community and thwarted their attempts to establish a dialogue, even as a closer look at the entirety of these comments would reveal more ambivalence about whether players would ultimately prefer EA to repair the bridge that downvoters were gleefully burning to ground. Meanwhile, the overall discourse on the *Reddit* AMA had a significant impact on the game’s surrounding reception, as gaming publications and other news sites repeatedly cited the thread’s previously mentioned ‘most downvoted comment in *Reddit* history’ as a defining moment in the game’s controversy.

EA’s last-minute plans to remove microtransactions from the game likewise had little initial impact on its reception as users took to the aggregate review site *Metacritic* in large

⁵⁶ TheVestalViking, Ibid.

⁵⁷ Mtenuy1, Ibid.

⁵⁸ daffy_duck233, Mtenuy1, Ibid.

numbers to review bomb the game before it was officially released. Notably, many of these users would have played the semi-open beta and wrote their reviews with at least some foreknowledge of the game. They then used review-bombing tactics to register their disappointment in *Battlefront II*'s commercialized bent, which ruined what many otherwise felt was an enjoyable *Star Wars* gaming experience. Several reviews highlighted the audience's ability to boycott EA's game and cancel their preorders. As user TZT put it "dont buy this game! If we continue to buy games for \$60 with microtransactions, then it will only get worse 1/10 and 1 is only for the good game ruined by EA."⁵⁹ AdamP likewise wrote that "DICE did a pretty good job with the game overall. But what EA does continuously, it's unforgiveable! [...] And yes, they changed a few things because the community forced them to, but don't stop there! We can unite to destroy this current cancerous AAA gaming industry."⁶⁰ In both these reviews, users give *Battlefront II* a rating of one to offer some token appreciation for the game buried beneath the broken microtransaction system but emphasized action through commercial boycotting.

In other cases, users note how a familiarity with *Star Wars* impacts their relationship with the game. As T1gg3rComp4any argues, "this game is designed specifically to exploit and prey on Star Wars fans. It literally hopes you will trust the brand and blindly fall into it's [sic] gambling pit before you realise how badly hidden the spikes at the bottom are. Disgusting, avoid like the plague."⁶¹ Similarly, tak-20115 writes "Please Do Not Buy until EA confirms permanent removal of Pay To Win system. Will take thousands of hours to unlock everything. To Star Wars fans, you will be so disappointed!!"⁶² Finally, as JozinZBazin puts it: "I really love star wars, but

⁵⁹ TZT, "Star Wars Battlefront II — User Reviews," *Metacritic*, November 2017, <http://www.metacritic.com/game/playstation-4/star-wars-battlefront-ii/user-reviews>.

⁶⁰ AdamP, Ibid.

⁶¹ T1gg3rComp4any, Ibid. <http://www.metacritic.com/game/playstation-4/star-wars-battlefront-ii/user-reviews?page=4>.

⁶² tak-20115, Ibid.

if I have to pay to play for Darth Vader, in the game for which I already paid \$60, then I %@*# this game. #boycottEA.”⁶³ In these negative reviews, users situate their dislike for the game within the context of their fandom and emphasize how pay to play mechanics act as a betrayal to the franchise. Taking a closer look at the last two entries, though, we can also see subtle indications that these negative reviews allow for a future version of the game that would negate their disapproval. After all, when tak-20115 writes “Please Do Not Buy until EA confirms permanent removal of Pay to Win system,” the review ultimately acknowledges EA has the ability to revise the game and that any “permanent” removal of the game’s pay to win system would be revisable as well. Similarly, JozinZBazin pointedly writes “if I have to pay,” seemingly internalizing the game’s potential for change amidst the review’s call for boycotting.

Despite these brief glimpses at a more ambivalent reception, where some users may use their negative reviews to encourage EA to improve *Battlefront II* and others may do so as part of a larger protest for gaming industry practices, *Metacritic*’s platform flatly categorizes user reviews within an aggregate score. At a glance, the overwhelming audience discourse on the game reads as an expression of unified outrage based on that score, even if users returned to *Metacritic*’s review page for the game years after its release. As of the summer of 2022, the user review scores for the *PlayStation 4* and *Xbox One* versions of *Battlefront II* still register at an “overwhelmingly negative” 1.6 and 1.7 out of 10, respectively. Once again, if we end the discussion of the game’s reception here it would seem that Electronic Arts never recovered, that the game’s reputation was never salvaged, and that the audience’s outrage led to a triumphant challenge to the industry’s predatory business practices. There is also some indication that

⁶³ JozinZBazin, *Ibid.* http://www.metacritic.com/game/playstation-4/star-wars-battlefront-ii/user-reviews?sort-by=date&num_items=100&page=22.

audiences felt this way the moment EA first removed the microtransactions. In a Twitter post announcing the decision, EA DICE's General Manager Oskar Gabrielson stated:

We hear you loud and clear, so we're turning off all in-game purchases. We will now spend more time listening, adjusting, balancing and tuning. [...] We'll share more details as we work through this.⁶⁴

The post's subsequent comments are then filled both with elated gifs featuring captions like "We did it!" and "Justice!", and more doubtful responses, such as the obligatory inclusion of the Admiral Ackbar "It's a Trap!" meme (Figure 1 and Figure 2). The tweet itself, however, suggests that the game's status was anything but resolved and the notion that the developers would continue "adjusting, balancing and tuning" would then set the tone for a long, sluggish overhaul on the game's overall appeal to its audience.

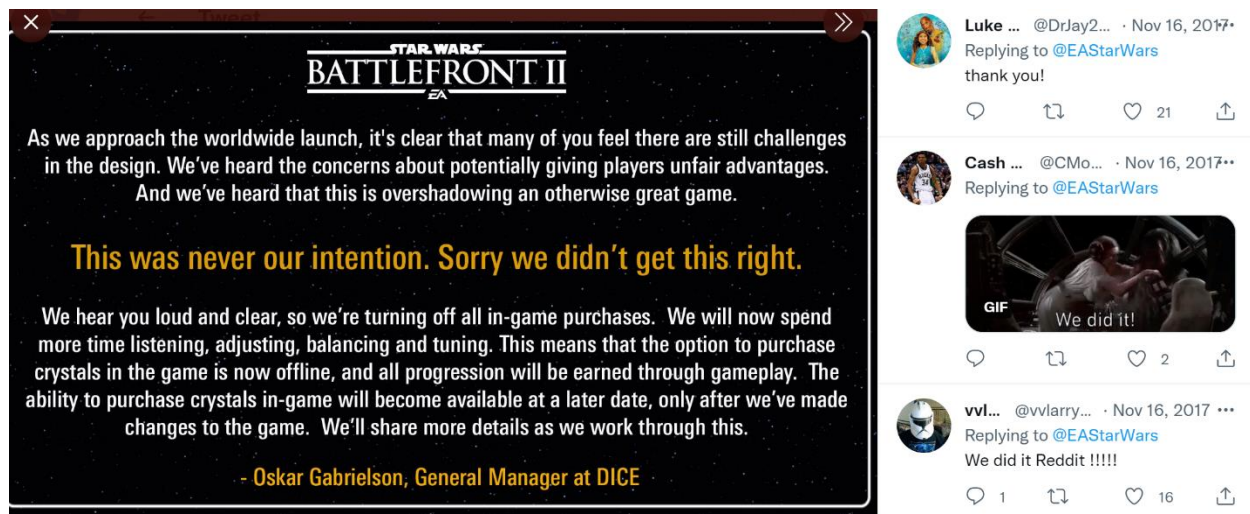


Figure 1

⁶⁴ EA Star Wars, Twitter post, November 16, 2017, 7:27 PM, "https://twitter.com/EAStarWars/status/931332890717143040/.

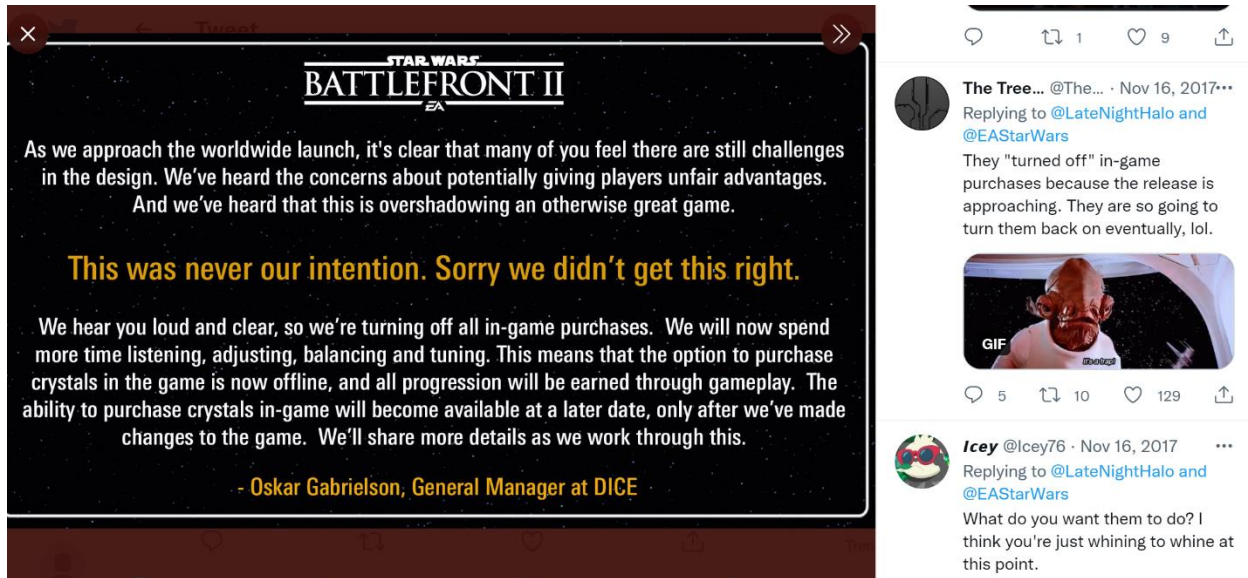


Figure 2

Roughly five months after the game's initial controversy, EA released an update with their revamped upgrade system and solidified what the game would ultimately become after its revision.⁶⁵ The loot box upgrade mechanic was gone and a more linear progression system was used in its place. Notably, the company also reinstated a microtransaction system but limited it to more palatable cosmetic skins, rather than relying on their maligned pay to win mechanic. Around the same time, EA began heavily advertising new DLC expansions in concert with the game's system overhaul. In an interview advertising *Battlefront II*'s new patch and its upcoming expansions, producer Paul Kelsin emphasized the game's ability to revise itself and expand on its appeal, stating "We want to continue to bring people new experiences, new content, keep making balance passes and bug fixes for the game."⁶⁶ Meanwhile, online game publications publicized *Battlefront II*'s expansions as a corrective for the game's previous failures, such as the same

⁶⁵ "Revamped Progression is Coming Soon," *Star Wars Battlefront II*, accessed July 3, 2022, <https://www.ea.com/games/starwars/battlefront/star-wars-battlefront-2/news/progression-update>.

⁶⁶ Paul Kelsin, interviewed by Matt Cabral, "Battlefront II Update Brings New Maps, New Mode, and Most Importantly...Jetpacks," February 28, 2018, <https://www.starwars.com/news/battlefront-ii-update-brings-new-maps-new-mode-and-jetpacks>.

Kotaku writer quoted earlier writing a new review with the headline “*Battlefront II*’s Clone Wars Update Is The Star Wars I Wanted All Along.”⁶⁷ Through the game’s eventual revision, EA could then sell its audience on returning to *Battlefront II* as a new experience, even if its updating represented a process more akin to negotiated renovations.

In terms of the controversy’s overall impact on sales, the data available is incomplete but there are indications that Electronic Arts emerged from the backlash relatively unscathed. Amidst the game’s initial rocky reception, the sales figures underperformed compared to expectations and sales from the company’s earlier release of *Star Wars Battlefront* but still posted over seven million copies sold and that figure climbed to nine million copies within the first three months of the game’s release.⁶⁸ That figure fell roughly one million under the market expectations for the game, but still represented a clear success within the larger context of triple-A game sales. Beyond that, Electronic Arts stopped reporting on its sales after January 2018 and as with other triple-A game companies it does not publicize its internal data on virtual currency buy-ins. But given that the company continued to release ‘free’ DLC expansions for the game nearly four years into its release, it’s reasonable to suggest *Battlefront II*’s revamped in-game economy model at least supported the development for new content. Similarly, EA found other means to buy players into the game at a low cost, not only slashing the price of the game itself but also briefly releasing *Battlefront II* for free on the Epic game store—a move that led to the game being claimed over 19 million times by the online store’s users.⁶⁹ Finally, when EA

⁶⁷ Heather Alexandra, “*Battlefront II*’s Clone Wars Update is the Star Wars I Wanted All Along,” *Kotaku*, November 28, 2018, <https://kotaku.com/battlefront-iis-clone-wars-update-is-the-star-wars-i-wa-1830719584>.

⁶⁸ Samit Sarkar, “Star Wars Battlefront 2 Sales Miss Targets, EA Blames Loot Crate Controversy (Update),” *Polygon*, January 30, 2018, <https://www.polygon.com/2018/1/30/16952396/star-wars-battlefront-2-sales-loot-boxes-returning>.

⁶⁹ Sherif Saed, “Over 19 Million Players Claimed Star Wars: Battlefront 2 Freebie on the Epic Store,” *vg247*, January 26, 2021, <https://www.vg247.com/star-wars-battlefront-2-19-million-free-epic-games-store#:~:text=For%20a%20full%20week%2C%20the,was%20unsurprisingly%20a%20big%20success.&text=EA%20announced%20that%20Battlefront%202,to%20be%20a%20new%20record>.

published the new franchise entry *Star Wars: Jedi Fallen Order* in 2019, while also stepping down as the game's developer, the game topped 10 million unit sales itself and indicated the *Star Wars* franchise continued to have a strong market presence in gaming.⁷⁰

As far as the audience's reception of *Battlefront II*'s later revision, it's worth returning to the *Metacritic* user reviews for the game. Despite *Battlefront II*'s persistently low scores, the audience review bombing exaggerates that discourse in part because users flooded the reviews in huge numbers to purposefully drag down the game's score. However, if we look at the user reviews for *Battlefront II* posted within the last couple of years, the unified front of the game's controversy breaks down and we see a much more ambivalent reading on the game's revised reception. In some cases, user reviews hold on to their feelings of animosity for the game's initially callous use of loot boxes. Martinho_99 simply frames his 2021 review in the past tense, writing "I won't even start about how terrible EA is or what an impudence the loot boxes were. [...] This is the EA circle of hell, only way to get out was paying real money for the loot boxes."⁷¹ Similarly, Dom007 writes "EA like to ruin everything. Even Star Wars. This game has gotten better over the years but I still can't get over the launch this game had."⁷² In both cases, the reviewers intentionally disregard the game's revision, while the latter writer still acknowledges that the game has improved over the years since its release. By contrast to the negative reviews still trying to hold EA accountable for its past practices, there are far more positive entries several years later that embrace the game's revision. For example, one review

⁷⁰ "Star Wars: Jedi Fallen Order," *VGChartz*, accessed July 3, 2022, <https://www.vgchartz.com/game/227983/star-wars-jedi-fallen-order/?region=All>.

⁷¹ martinho_99, "*Star Wars Battlefront II* — User Reviews," *Metacritic*, June 9, 2021, https://www.metacritic.com/game/playstation-4/star-wars-battlefront-ii/user-reviews?sort-by=date&num_items=100.

⁷² Dom007, "*Star Wars Battlefront II* — User Reviews," *Metacritic*, Mar 13, 2021, https://www.metacritic.com/game/playstation-4/star-wars-battlefront-ii/user-reviews?sort-by=date&num_items=100.

mentions its controversy only to quickly dismiss it, writing “It may have had its controversy. But now it is one of my favorite games to play,”⁷³ while another review states that “I’d recommend fans to try this game out again [...] it’s so much better.”⁷⁴ The contrast between these two approaches to later user reviews then belies a more extensive ambivalence surrounding the game’s amended controversy. The game industry can then use updates and expansions to rehabilitate the game’s image, while the growing precedent of digital revisionism threatens to normalize and standardize the industry’s reclamation of failure.

Conclusion

Throughout this chapter, I have been careful to note the audience’s potential power within reception studies while still maintaining that the industry works hard to harness the affective investment of its audience in their games and holds far more control over the ways in which media texts convey meaning and can be commoditized. In many cases, both audience studies and fan studies detail ways in which audiences gain further control once a media text is released to the public but the advent of digital updates and expansions challenges that dynamic, because the industry can alter a text regardless of user’s ‘ownership’ over it. Still, if there was any point at which the industry’s hegemonic control over new media would seem to wane and become vulnerable, I believe it is in the very moments of galvanized controversy that help to mark industry change and the contested status for new digital norms. In the console gaming industry, the last several years have been replete with such controversies where audiences have raged against the industry’s new normal to varying degrees of success. But while these efforts

⁷³ Wboy2006, “*Star Wars Battlefront II* — User Reviews,” *Metacritic*, June 22, 2022, https://www.metacritic.com/game/playstation-4/star-wars-battlefront-ii/user-reviews?sort-by=date&num_items=100.

⁷⁴ JayconUnlimited, “*Star Wars Battlefront II* — User Reviews,” *Metacritic*, March 5, 2022, https://www.metacritic.com/game/playstation-4/star-wars-battlefront-ii/user-reviews?sort-by=date&num_items=100.

can, in the moment, create real and meaningful change—especially when players successfully use social media connectivity and the visibility of review bombing to threaten the success of a title’s launch—these changes are still temporally bound by the emotional primacy of controversy.

By studying the console gaming industry’s turbulent incorporation of new digital norms and online affordances, we can not only understand the stakes involved with changes to the ownership of media and the ways in which that media becomes commoditized but also the ways in which this evolving relationship between audiences and industry producers gives insight into the broader dynamics of digital change as an institutional strategy. In this case, the changes that occur with each gaming update reveals how revision, in and of itself, can be a mechanism of control. To put this another way, players can suggest desired changes for a game and for an industry, they can even use galvanized controversy to push the industry toward these goals, and these demands might lead to a new update that delivers on that audience’s desires and attempts to mollify their displeasure. If the game remained a product that had a terminal end-use functionality, that change would then write the history of its reception. However, for better or worse games are no longer static, they live online and are continually renewed through further updates and expansions, and the life cycle of a game will extend beyond any crisis in its reception. The industry can use changes to resolve any momentary unrest with their audience and continue to revise a text as they learn from their failures.

With this understanding of digital revisionism in mind, there are several insights we can draw from the *Star Wars Battlefront II* controversy. As audiences become more savvy online users, they find new ways to put pressure on media companies and hold them accountable for predatory practices. And yet, companies can also use digital distribution and online discussions

to construct a litmus test for what business practices audiences will accept. If loot boxes appear particularly egregious today, companies might slowly normalize those mechanics later on through the negotiation process of digital revisionism. Mia Consalvo sums up the situation well, writing that “players and game developers exist in a push-pull of interdependence, constantly exerting pressure on one another to gain control of the experience of gameplay as well as how to define that experience.”⁷⁵ As the sheer number of publications writing on the current status of *Star Wars Battlefront II* months after its release would suggest, audiences are getting more accustomed to games slowly defining themselves through their updates and developers can leverage that process as a form of control. In the case of the players, though, the evolving efficacy of expressing outrage online does at least give them additional tools to wrest their media back from corporate hands. The task that remains is how to keep these audiences engaged, to keep them demanding change not just in the heat of controversy but in the mundane purgatory of a game’s post-release malaise.

⁷⁵ Consalvo (2006), 176.

Conclusion: Evolving Games, Evolving Receptions

Throughout this dissertation, I have worked to demonstrate the stakes of the digital turn in the game industry by focusing on the console generation as a revealing precedent for platform governance, digital commoditization, and the evolving update cultures that surround modern game receptions. In part, my interest in these issues lie in the challenge of analyzing digital media as an isolated text when in fact they contain multitudes through their ability to change with updates and add-ons, expanding on and intensifying the existing market logics of media's renewal, as the cultural industries have often sought ways to either prolong or reestablish media's appeals through syndication or second-run markets, new implementations of technology like home video or 3D distribution, media franchising, transmedia storytelling, and a number of other production and distribution strategies. However, when we consider the broader shift toward the media industry's reliance on service models, online servers hosting media content, cloud-based subscriptions, built-in digital marketplaces, and streamlined updates, it becomes clear that the media text itself has moved from a predominately static and self-contained object into a transitory experience in which that media can be remade through its connection to the Internet. This shift in design has then pushed audiences toward an acculturation for new digital norms that leaves them with less control over the goods they purchase and use.

When the console industry opened digital games up to online revision, they did so in a way that harnessed the complexity of a black box technological design and ensured that the power to change and remake a game rested predominantly in the industry's hands. Even so, the industry's capacity for revision remains both contested and in a constant state of evolution. Game producers can use digital expansions and updates to optimize and prolong a game's economic appeals, rewrite controversies for a game's reception, and reshape a game's online

experience through the console's use of contingent updating. However, these norms around digital change have yet to settle into immutable industry practices and standards. Instead, the use of online expansions and updates speak to how the industry's larger stance on digital revisionism provides the industry an ad hoc flexibility to remake and even redefine not just a game itself, but the means with which players can interact with gaming as a broader cultural experience.

To establish the industry's winding trajectory toward digital revisionism, I began this dissertation in Chapter 1 by discussing the console's adoption of online affordance within the context of a black box technological framework. I argued that the console industry deviated from the established participatory cultures in PC online gaming, most notably from the precedent of modding communities and digital tinkering, and instead placed boundaries and constraints on player creativity using platform governance and the adoption of an online service model, wherein industry producers can discontinue its digital servers once games are no longer perceived as economically viable. Furthermore, while some intrepid hobbyists have found ways to mod console games and homebrew or jailbreak the consoles themselves, these exceptions for player co-production practices only further emphasize the precarity involved with pushing against the console's intended design. After establishing the console's black box framework and platform restrictions, I then sought to connect the game industry's leveraged control over their networked technology with an evolving industry standard that prioritized and commodified the process of media revision.

In Chapter 2, I expanded on the console's use of its online platform to consider how industry producers worked to commodify and normalize digital expansions and add-ons, while once again examining how related game industry fields inform the console industry's own incorporation of networked affordances. The PC gaming industry offered clear groundwork for

how digital expansions could renew player interest in games and even commodify the social construction of gaming, particularly when these expansions connected to a game's broader online functionality. Meanwhile, the online console launches in the mid-2000s occurred within a similar timeline as the burgeoning mobile game industry and the two development sectors ultimately seemed to adopt similar strategies around incorporating in-game economies that directly impacted gaming mechanics. For the console industry, these influences culminated in strategies for the console's use of DLC and digital game currencies, which not only experimented with indefinitely prolonging the life cycle of a game but also finding ways to commodify play and online sociality. Through a growing prevalence of predatory digital business models that relied on microtransactions, loot box mechanics, gambling structures, and purposefully complex in-game currencies, the industry could then push the economic threshold of a player's investment in a game and create a context in which they define gameplay through what I have called a paradox of conditional expansion.

In Chapter 3, I transitioned from digital expansions to consider the normalization and encouraged free labor involved with emergent update cultures in the game industry. By focusing on the cyclical trend of broken game development and the industry's overreliance on day-one patching, I highlighted how game producers have used updates to revise instances of failure and salvage a game's overall reception. I argued that the industry has harnessed player disappointment and outrage as a form ad hoc free labor by encouraging players to report on bugs and errors in order to receive the game they were initially promised. Through the industry's use of online affordances, I argued that game producers reinforced what I have called a *perpetual update culture*, in which game producers recontextualize norms associated with perpetual beta design—typically involving a free, working version of software released to the public in

exchange for user feedback to help with corrective updates—within the context of a purchased game. In the process, the game industry has purposefully used the software edict of ‘always improving, never complete’ as a bulwark for controversy, shifting player expectations away from present failures to the promised future potential of the updated game.

Finally, Chapter 4 considered the broader tensions that have emerged between industry producers and their audience as the console industry has slowly adopted these production and distribution practices. While players find themselves pushed toward the periphery of the game itself and the industry capitalizes on the affordances of digital interventions on media, audiences still retain a critical degree of influence over a game’s alteration particularly in moments of galvanized controversy. Over the past several years, players have pushed back against both objectionable content in games and the pronounced commodification of gameplay, using the visibility of hashtag protesting and review bombing to influence the discourse surrounding game receptions and pushing the industry toward the changes they are entirely capable of making. Still, I argued that this larger dynamic of digital revisionism works both ways and the industry can use these moments of controversy to help outline the limits of an audience’s current acceptance for new digital norms or any other substantial negative feedback that might damage a company’s brand. In the process, the game industry can learn from their audience’s outrage and retain the ability to revise the game in the event they push their audience too far. Meanwhile, these revisions can threaten to weaken an audience’s resolve since each new controversy on a topic like gambling-based loot box mechanics prompts a renewed energy and investment for outrage, while the industry need only change in response when that outrage threatens to overtake a game’s discourse and jeopardize their ability to generate sufficient profits.

Throughout the dissertation, I have also purposefully shifted the scope and considerations of digital revisionism with each chapter, starting with the online console's technological foundations and projecting outward from there to consider industry innovations on digital production and distribution strategies and the increasingly complex dynamic that takes place between producers and audiences amidst volatile receptions. To that end, this study helps to narrativize how the affordances of digital revisionism have evolved through the console industry's use of its networked technology, how audience participation has been either limited or even harnessed by the industry's attempts to commoditize online play and the player's investment in gaming, and the degree to which audiences can still influence digital change and hold sway over how gaming uses its capacity for reinvention. My final chapter makes the case that the industry can use audience receptions as a barometer for their current acceptance of industry practices and then repurpose their revisionism to slowly push the limits on what may seem acceptable, or more importantly what may eventually seem inevitable. Nevertheless, it remains important to remind ourselves that these industry practices are not *actually* inevitable, even if audience fatigue has seemingly begun to set in with some of the industry's more avaricious practices. Audiences still have the power to challenge the game industry's ideological assumptions, its stance on platform governance or perpetual update cultures, or its intense commodification of online play and community formations. However, in order to successfully challenge these practices and continually push for a different future of online gaming, players have to also be aware that the process of digital revisionism not only takes shape over distinct moments of controversy and intense backlash but also involves a longer view of the updating and expansions that take place over months and years.

This understanding of the digital text as an open-ended experience subject to change also fundamentally reorients our understanding of media, in part because our experiences with digital texts do not just involve their present-day uses but also speculation on what you *could* experience in a future version of that text and the retrospective loss of what you can *no longer* experience after that versioning takes place. As discussed in Chapter 3, developers can harness the rhetoric of updating with broken game releases in part because the industry has established a precedent for a game's digital evolution. By contrast, Chapter 1 mentions how the discontinuation of online servers creates a temporal limit on a game's online functionality and a reminder that modern audiences may not own the full breadth of an online game so much as own temporary access to it. Similarly, Chapter 2 discusses how the inclusion of new expansions may push out older online campaigns, a point most readily illustrated by the controversy involved with Bungie 'vaulting' older content in their online first-person shooter *Destiny 2* to make room for new DLC releases. Finally, Chapter 4's case study reveals that even when an industry makes a change in response to player backlash, such as with the removed loot box mechanics for *Star Wars Battlefront II*, the subsequent game can result in more of an update purgatory where players have to wait months to see what the final version of an overhauled game may entail. With that said, the power of digital intervention need not solely be an industry affordance; it can work in the audience's favor as well, but that requires audiences to use the industry's precedent for adaptability to consistently press for better industry practices. In this final conclusion, I will offer some parting thoughts on how we might interpret the evolving nature of games and gaming receptions. In the process, I hope to suggest further avenues for academic inquiry and highlight how our understanding of gaming culture must contend with a larger consideration of digital media's impermanence.

Understanding the Motivations Behind a Game's Evolution

Throughout my research, I have grappled with the implications of the industry's use of expansions and updates as something that uses the broader flexibility of software design to reinforce a company's own hegemonic control over media and its uses. Sometimes, the incorporation of a game's evolution may relate to how the industry can slowly use updates and player engagement to refine their in-game economy appeals, such as studying moments when players are *just* frustrated enough with a game's difficult gameplay to buy an add-on upgrade but not so frustrated that they drop the game entirely.¹ Similarly, developers may change and expand on their game based on popularity and a growing online community, such as when *Fortnite* increasingly prioritized selling new season passes and add-on packs with different cosmetic skins, dances, and equipment to create a social environment defined by an avatar's purchased range of expression. In these cases, the game's alterations highlight moments of optimized commerce and suggest how game producers may view an audience's engagement as an opportunity to commoditize instances of the player's impatience to succeed in a game or their desire to express themselves within an online community.

Despite these more calculating uses of expansions and updates, there are also instances where digital revisionism works to better align a game with the audience's wants and expectations. In some cases, developers may update a game to address failures in a game's reception. For example, Bethesda released the 'Wastelanders' update for *Fallout 76* in 2020, nearly two years after the game's initial release, which worked to address the game's perceived failings. Most notably, Bethesda included NPCs to populate the game's post-apocalyptic Appalachia, which addressed a long-held critique from both players and reviewers that the

¹ David B. Nieborg, "Crushing Candy: The Free-to-Play Game in Its Connective Commodity Form," *Social Media + Society* 1, no. 2 (2015).

game's online world felt too empty. In a review of *Fallout 76*'s 'Wastelanders' release, *Polygon* critic Cass Marshall highlights the tensions involved with re-evaluating a game after its revision:

I was someone who rage-quit *Fallout 76* after sticking with it for months. I was ready for the game to burn me again this time, too. But Wastelanders won me over. It's less the content that's there, and more what it represents — this is a confident, strongly executed new path that allows *Fallout 76* to be a well-supported online game rather than a series of floundering experiments.²

The reviewer's closing comments not only describe a need for the game to win them over with its expansion but also suggests a dichotomy between a 'well-supported online game' where new updates and expansions can enrich the player's experience and the floundering experimentation of digital revisionism. In this case, though, the developers likely used their 'floundering experiments' with *Fallout 76* over the two years that preceded the game's 'Wastelanders' release to know what needed to be changed. As I argued in Chapter 3 and Chapter 4, post-release updates can take advantage of a game's ability to revise itself to rewrite the industry's own failure. It's worth pointing out, though, that another possible interpretation of these update cultures involves the industry learning what the audience really wants from a particular title. In the case of *Fallout 76*, the franchise had never tried to create an online version of its world up to this point, so the updates here not only show a more calculating element of revising failure but also a more optimistic reading of an industry producer using audience feedback to create a better gaming experience.

²Cass Marshall, "I Thought I Was Out of *Fallout 76* — and Wastelanders Pulled Me Back In," *Kotaku*, April 14, 2020, <https://www.polygon.com/2020/4/14/21219015/fallout-76-wastelanders-update-improvements-companions-dialogue-mmo>.

When audiences better understand the inherent adaptability of digital gaming, they can use that knowledge to press the industry on meaningful change. For instance, when Toys for Bob and Activision released the remastered *Spyro Reignited Trilogy* (2018) for a new generation of consoles, the game initially drew ire from fans for not including subtitles for the game's spoken cut scenes in the updated release.³ When audiences challenged the game producers on that decision, arguing that the *Spyro* remaster lacked accessibility for the hearing impaired, they did so with the knowledge that games *could* be revised based on their feedback. Initially, though, the developers pushed back against the idea that they should update their game, releasing a response that instead stated:

When Toys For Bob set out to make an awesome game collection, there were certain decisions that needed to be made throughout the process. [...] The game was built from the ground up using a new engine for the team (Unreal 4), and was localized in languages that had not previously been attempted by the studio. While there's no industry standard for subtitles, the studio and Activision care about the fans' experience especially with respect to accessibility for people with different abilities, and will evaluate going forward.⁴

The official response implies that the resources that could have gone to ensuring accessibility for the hearing impaired had instead gone to using new technology for the remaster and localizing voice overs in new languages (which, not incidentally, would benefit the game's international marketability and global sales). The developers likewise attempt to push the issue forward

³ Shabana Arif, "Spyro Reignited Trilogy's Lack of Subtitles Frustrates Players, Activision's Response Makes it Worse," *vg247*, November 19, 2018, accessed June 26, 2022, <https://www.vg247.com/spyro-reignited-trilogys-lack-of-subtitles-frustrates-players-activisions-response-makes-it-worse>.

⁴ Rob Pitt, "There's Something Missing From the Spyro Reignited Collection...", *GamePitt*, November 16, 2018, accessed June 26, 2022, <https://www.gamepitt.co.uk/theres-something-missing-from-the-spyro-reignited-collection/>.

toward eventual future releases, rather than agreeing to change the current game. However, *Spyro*'s audiences continued to apply pressure, creating online petitions and flooding Activision's support center with requests for better accessibility standards,⁵ while game journalists and disability advocates challenged the developer's claim that subtitles were not an industry standard.^{6,7} Finally, four months after *Spyro Reignited Trilogy*'s release, the developers relented and updated their game with new subtitles.⁹

This controversy over accessibility and subtitles foregrounds not only the audience's ability to make digital revisionism work in their favor but also reveals the motivations that often lie behind these digital changes. With the *Spyro* remastered release, industry producers had very clearly decided to prioritize new graphics and multilingual voice overs over deaf and otherwise hearing-impaired audiences and naturally framed these production decisions as an economic imperative. Still, the developer's use of the phrase 'industry standard' foreshadowed the controversy's resolution because it suggested that game production is not solely about cold and efficient economic exigencies but also involves an established community standard for gaming. The audience's persistent backlash then involved not just the desire for a particular game to change but also an activist-driven agenda to ensure game producers take a game's accessibility into account with their releases. Furthermore, audiences actively rejected the developer's

⁵ Adam Sklar, "Add Subtitles to Spyro: Reignited Trilogy's Cutscenes!", *Change.org*, accessed June 26, 2022, <https://www.change.org/p/toys-for-bob-add-subtitles-to-spyro-reignited-trilogy-s-cutscenes>.

⁶ Matt Wales, "Activision Does Poor Job of Placating Spyro Fans Angry at Missing Subtitle Accessibility," *EuroGamer*, November 20, 2018, accessed June 26, 2022, <https://www.eurogamer.net/activision-does-poor-job-of-placating-spyro-fans-angry-at-missing-subtitle-accessibility-options>.

⁷ Henry St Leger, "Activision Ignites Rage Over Spyro's Accessibility Failure," *TechRadar*, November 20, 2018, accessed June 26, 2022, <https://www.techradar.com/news/activision-ignites-rage-over-spyros-accessibility-failure>.

⁸ Kyle Orland, "Activision Adds Classic Spyro Subtitles Months After Fan Outcry [Updated]," *Ars Technica*, March 13, 2019, accessed June 26, 2022, <https://arstechnica.com/gaming/2019/03/spyro-remaster-skips-subtitles-leaves-hard-of-hearing-gamers-in-the-cold/>.

⁹ Shabana Arif, "Activision Finally Adds Subtitles to Spyro Reignited Trilogy," *vg247*, March 12, 2019, accessed June 26, 2022, <https://www.vg247.com/activision-finally-adds-subtitles-spyro-reignited-trilogy#:~:text=The%20latest%20patch%20for%20Spyro,subtitle%20in%20the%20game's%20cutscenes.>

suggested path of revision as one of future consideration, but that rejection only bore results after months of a concerted effort to push the industry on their decisions and priorities. With this prolonged back and forth between industry producers and audiences in mind, it's then worth considering not just how games can change but how our relationship to revision and development has fundamentally altered the expectations surrounding game releases.

Volatile Receptions and the Expectations of Updating

In 2009, *GameRadar* published an article titled “WARNING: *Far Cry 2* Is Still A Broken Game”, which comprised less of a review than a four page digital progress report on the game’s post-release status six months after *Far Cry 2* went to market.¹⁰ In that report, the author first outlines the many game ending bugs that could upend a user’s investment in *Far Cry 2*’s campaign, before detailing a series of official responses from developer Ubisoft that state the company’s intentions of correcting the game’s issues even as the title languished in months of update limbo. Ubisoft’s responses can offer us an unintentional first draft for how the troubled company would navigate the same kind of failure with the *Assassin’s Creed Unity* case study detailed in Chapter 3. In one statement to their understandably aggrieved audience, Ubisoft writes:

A lot of you are wondering what is happening with the corrupt save bug that causes the player to get stuck at a couple of different completion percentages. [...] We fully appreciate that it’s a frustratingly long wait for those of you experiencing this bug. We’re keen to resolve this issue for you as soon as possible and we are absolutely committing all the resources we can towards achieving this.¹¹

¹⁰ Shane Patterson, “WARNING: *Far Cry 2* is Still a Broken Game,” *GamesRadar*, April 7, 2009, accessed June 26, 2022, <https://www.gamesradar.com/warning-far-cry-2-is-still-a-broken-game/>.

¹¹ Ibid. <https://www.gamesradar.com/warning-far-cry-2-is-still-a-broken-game/3/>

In this response, the developer clearly accepts the need for their development to continue after the game's release, but they have yet to establish a rhetorical stance that post-release updating should be considered a natural phase of development or that users should participate in that process by reporting on bugs and errors. By contrast, consider once again how Ubisoft's framed their failure with *Assassin's Creed Unity*'s launch, such as asking for users to "please keep your feedback coming"¹² and that the developers "are always looking to improve the experience and Launch is just the beginning."¹³ The change in the company's tone then follows a change in the growing industry precedent for these kinds of post-release revisions, while the article itself indicates a need for gaming news and review sites to not only account for game releases but the longer digital lives of these titles.

GameRadar's warning about the ongoing status of *Far Cry 2* suggested the relationship between game producers and audiences had changed with the digital game's capacity for reinvention but that the industry's approach to revising media had yet to settle into codified practice. However, within the last several years these precedents have become a more persistent fixture of the game industry, especially as developers and publishers have used updates to essentially relaunch their titles. In one of the more revealing and historic cases for an updated relaunch of a game, we can consider *No Man's Sky* (2016) within the context of two distinct receptions: one for the game's initially disappointing launch and another for the rebranded, critically successful release of the 'Next' update two years afterward. When Hello Game first released *No Man's Sky*, director and head developer Sean Murray had made the rounds on press junkets promising a number of dizzying, complex features for the sci-fi crafting explorer that the

¹² Yannis Mallat, "Newsletter," *Ubisoft*, November 25, 2014, http://newsletter.ubisoft.com/en-gb/2014/11/25_ACUP3/25_ACUP3.html.

¹³ UbiJustin, "AC:Unity major glitches," *Ubisoft*, November 11, 2014, <https://forums.ubi.com/>.

game's release failed to deliver on—most notably with the broken promise of online matchmaking and the notion that you could stumble upon other users within your exploration of the game's expanding universe.¹⁴ As a result, the initial reception for *No Man's Sky* triggered a large-scale debate on what we could call empty game development, in which a game's controversy involves a perceived lack of depth, and the disconnect between hyped-up marketing campaigns and the actual experience of a game itself.

When *No Man's Sky* hit the market in the summer of 2016, it was initially a commercial success. Polygon reported that the game was the best-selling release on the PlayStation Store in August and that within a month it had sold approximately 743,000 digital copies on Steam's network.¹⁵ However, the game's backlash set in within those early weeks as well and disappointed players soon submitted so many refund requests on Steam that the company had to issue a statement on the game's homepage:

The standard Steam refund applies to *No Man's Sky*. There are no special exemptions available. Click here for more detail on the Steam refund policy.¹⁶

Steam further clarified that it would not refund the game if those who purchased it had played for more than two hours, even though some publications noted the company had initially made exceptions under their “false advertising” provision.¹⁷ Meanwhile, players who submitted refund

¹⁴ Note: There's an extensive takedown on *No Man's Sky*'s misleading advertisements archived on Reddit, including links to interviews and sources that quoted Sean Murray. Several news outlets like *Kotaku*, *Vice*, and *Forbes* reference this thread when commenting on the game's notoriety. See: “Where's the *No Man's Sky* We Were Sold On?,” Reddit, Accessed May 13, 2017, https://www.reddit.com/r/Games/comments/4y1h9i/wheres_the_no_mans_sky_we_were_sold_o_n_a_big_list/.

¹⁵ Ben Kuchera, “*No Man's Sky* was a PR Disaster Wrapped in Huge Sales,” *Polygon*, September 16, 2016, <https://www.polygon.com/2016/9/16/12929618/no-mans-sky-disaster-lies-lessonslearned>.

¹⁶ Chris Pereira, “*No Man's Sky* Refund Claims Prompt a New Notice on Its Steam Page,” *GameSpot*, August 29, 2016, <https://www.gamespot.com/articles/no-mans-sky-refund-claimsprompt-a-new-notice-on-i/1100-6443120/>.

¹⁷ Matthew Humphries, “Steam Is Issuing *No Man's Sky* Refunds Even If You've Played For Over 70 Hours,” *Geek*, August 29th, 2016, <https://www.geek.com/tech/steam-is-issuing-no-manssky-refunds-even-if-youve-played-for-over-70-hours-1668389>.

requests to the PlayStation Store received a response that told them to address Hello Games directly with their concerns.¹⁸ Ultimately, the game's reception was defined not just by the player's disappointment in the game's lacking features but a larger struggle to hold game developers accountable for what they advertise.

However, even as *No Man's Sky* divided critics and earned scorn from players, the potential for renewal remained a key consideration in its media coverage. Sean Murray helped to frame that discourse in post-release interviews, in which he spoke on the game's potential revisions:

Post release, I want [*No Man's Sky*] to feel like a cohesive universe. But there is so much more that we could add. There are so many features that would play well to the game that I would describe as non-core to the experience.¹⁹

Much like with broken game development, Murray situates post-release updates for *No Man's Sky* as an attempt to rewrite the game's failings and deliver on its unmet potential (even as he attempts to defend the game's 'core' experience). In the meantime, different press outlets reinforced the discourse of *No Man's Sky*'s renewal as the developer began to release several small-scale patches in the months following its launch. *Kotaku*'s Kirk Hamilton wrote that "*No Man's Sky* is getting better. The game that left so many people feeling burned back in August may still not live up to the prior months of hype, but yesterday's patch makes big changes that anchor the game."²⁰ Similarly, *GQ* writer Sam White stated that "whatever your opinion about

¹⁸ Keri Honea, "Sony's Digital Refund Policy Under Fire Again After Angry Users Try to Get No Man's Sky Refund," *PlayStation Lifestyle*, August 19, 2016, <http://www.playstationlifestyle.net/2016/08/19/angry-users-denied-no-mans-sky-refund-fromsony/>.

¹⁹ Sean Murray, quoted by Christopher Byrd, "'No Man's Sky' Review: A Game Lost in Infinite Space," *The Washington Post*, August 30, 2016, https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/comicribs/wp/2016/08/30/no-mans-sky-review-a-game-lost-in-infinitespace/?utm_term=.b26c64a2382f.

²⁰ Kirk Hamilton, "No Man's Sky New Update Makes the Game Much More Grounded," *Kotaku*, November 28th, 2016, <http://kotaku.com/no-mans-skys-new-update-makes-the-game-muchmore-ground-1789436937>.

the PR debacle, one thing's for certain: Hello Games is not nearly done with *No Man's Sky*.”²¹

Much like with the *Far Cry 2*'s broken game development progress report, journalists and critics played a key role in substantiating the perpetual innovation of the updated game, while the reception for *No Man's Sky* extended beyond its initial controversy to consider how digital gaming can overwrite its own failings.

After *No Man's Sky* released its comprehensive 'Next' update in 2018, publications substantiated the revision by reviewing the game all over again. A *Polygon* review of 'Next' captures the strangeness and historic nature of the game's reinvention well, writing: Two years ago, *No Man's Sky*'s rapturous press cycle that promised the suns and the moons culminated with the messy business of reality. [...] But an unusual thing happened in the world of game development: Slowly but surely, *No Man's Sky*'s developer, Hello Games, made good on just about everything it promised ahead of the game's launch via free updates.²²

At this point, game developers using updates and expansions to recontextualize their releases had increasingly become standard for the industry (as this dissertation has established), but the intentions behind *No Man's Sky*'s updates do seem uniquely beholden to using updates not just as a shrewd defense for controversy but also as a good-faith effort to make amends with its spurned audience. This 'unusual' relationship to update cultures lies not just in the 'free' releases of these changes but that a development company would spend several years after a game's release to realign that game's experience with its audience's expectations rather than using updates to finetune a game's economic appeals or slowly, *eventually*, make the game playable. With that said, the underlying nature of *No Man's Sky*'s updates and expansions still work to

²¹Sam White, "Review: The No Man's Sky 'Path Finder' Update Makes You Actually Want to Play the Game," *GQ*, March 13, 2017, <http://www.gq-magazine.co.uk/article/no-mans-sky-pathfinder-review>.

²²Russ Frushtick, "No Man's Sky Next is an Astonishing Update, But Don't Expect a Brand-New Game," *Polygon*, July 27, 2018, <https://www.polygon.com/2018/7/27/17619906/no-mans-sky-next-review-update>.

learn from audience outrage and use the affordances of digital revisionism to convince audiences to reinvest their time in a game.

With this distinction in mind, *No Man's Sky* may speak to an unusual variation on the theme of revisionism, but its influence can still be seen in prevailing attitudes and expectations surrounding the digital game's unfinished and unrealized potential. For instance, when *Cyberpunk 2077* (2020) released to audience review-bombing and negative articles citing poor graphics, bugs, and performance issues—particularly for the lower-end console generation ports on the PlayStation 4 and Xbox One—criticisms often included the caveat that these apparent failings could easily become obsolete with a future iteration of the game. In fact, several articles mentioned both *Cyberpunk 2077* and *No Man's Sky* in the same breath, so much so that *Forbes* published an entire piece dedicated to dissuading other game journalists from making the comparison:

The launch of *No Man's Sky* was, indeed, a major letdown from the game that players had been expecting [...] It was a thin, empty, weird experience that didn't come close to capturing the majesty of that initial E3 reveal trailer. But, and this is crucial: it worked. It had launch bugs, sure, but nothing even close to the scale of *Cyberpunk 2077*.²³

In this account, the author draws a distinction between broken game development and empty game development, and it's a worthwhile difference to point out, but this doesn't explain why other writers made the comparison in the first place. *No Man's Sky* set a realistic path for game developers not just to salvage a game's reception but to actually reinvent the game's experience. Much like *No Man's Sky*, CD Projekt Red had preceded their launch by promising the 'suns and

²³Dave Thier, "Stop Comparing 'Cyberpunk 2077' to 'No Man's Sky' or 'The Witcher 3,'" *Forbes*, December 19, 2020, <https://www.forbes.com/sites/davidthier/2020/12/19/stop-comparing-cyberpunk-2077-to-no-mans-sky-or-the-witcher-3/?sh=193470635f42>.

moons’, using marketing hype to inspire players to invest early on in a lead-in for a staggering eight million pre-orders for the game.²⁴ When *Cyberpunk 2077* then failed to live up to that hype, the developer immediately used the rhetoric of a perpetual update culture to convince its audience that their tantalizing buildup for the game could be realized through its eventual revision.

Much like with *No Man’s Sky*’s continued discourse, online game publications reevaluated CD Projekt Red’s troubled release following its later patches, with running titles like *IGN*’s “*Cyberpunk 2077* Review Six Months Later - Is it Worth It?”²⁵ or *Polygon*’s “*Cyberpunk 2077*: A 2022 Re-Review.”²⁶ However, in these cases we can see a pointed shift toward a more speculative nature of the game’s reception, as writers attempt to evaluate changes in real time rather than after a definitive updated version of the game had been released (as with *No Man’s Sky*’s ‘Next’ update). This subtle difference indicates a broader trend in modern game receptions where a game’s imagined future could dominate the discourse even beyond considerations of the game’s present-tense experience. These discourses are then particularly frequent when Triple A developers release highly anticipated titles that both audiences and critics perceive as too big to fail, wherein updates can offer the illusive potential to figuratively right the ship.

This stance on digital revisionism has ultimately created an impression of instability and impermanence in the game industry, in the midst of what one *Kotaku* writer has called “the age

²⁴ Vikki Blake, “Cyberpunk 2077 Pre-Sold 8 Million Copies and is Now the Biggest PC Launch of All Time,” *TechRadar*, December 11, 2020, <https://www.techradar.com/news/cyberpunk-2077-pre-sold-8-million-copies-and-is-now-the-biggest-pc-launch-title-of-all-time>.

²⁵ Rahul Majumdar, “Cyberpunk 2077 Review Six Months Later – Is It Worth It?,” *IGN*, July 28, 2021, <https://in.ign.com/cyberpunk-2077-1/163359/feature/cyberpunk-2077-review-six-months-later-long-term-pc-amd-nvidia>.

²⁶ Cameron Kunzelman, “Cyberpunk 2077: a 2022 Re-Review,” *Polygon*, April 7, 2022, <https://www.polygon.com/reviews/23014759/cyberpunk-2077-patch-1-5-review-ps5-xbox-series-x>.

of the undying video game.”²⁷ Furthermore, as developers grow more accustomed to using digital affordances in concert with feedback from their audiences, they have increasingly framed these changes as an opportunity for renewal and revival. For example, when Bioware released the online third-person shooter *Anthem* (2019) to lackluster sales and poor reviews, they stubbornly continued to update the game while using its audience to suggest a path forward for the revision. In a blog post on *Anthem*’s upcoming updates, the developer details the larger industry logic driving these changes:

Over the last year, the team has worked hard to improve stability, performance and general quality of life while delivering three seasons of new content and features. We have also heard your feedback that *Anthem* needs a more satisfying loot experience, better long-term progression and a more fulfilling end game. So we recognize that there’s still more fundamental work to be done to bring out the full potential of the experience, and it will require a more substantial reinvention than an update or expansion.²⁸

Bioware’s commentary reveals not just the company’s attempts to learn from their audience’s disappointment but also pointedly states that the game’s post-release content somehow goes beyond a simple update or expansion to involve “substantial reinvention”. Unfortunately for Bioware, the developer failed to convince its audience to reinvest in these changes and finally shut down development almost three years after *Anthem*’s release. However, the three intervening years Bioware spent *trying* to revise the game speaks not only to changes in development practices but also larger changes in our expectations for digital media.

Coda

²⁷ Luke Plunkett, “It’s Weird How Some Games Are Now Too Big to Fail,” *Kotaku*, December 17, 2020, <https://kotaku.com/its-weird-how-some-games-are-now-too-big-to-fail-1845856895>.

²⁸ Casey Hudson, “Anthem Update,” *Bioware*, February 10, 2020, <https://blog.bioware.com/2020/02/10/anthem-update-february-10/>.

Ultimately, if there *is* a growing expectation for games to use updates and expansions not only to fix small errors, adjust the balancing in online gameplay, or sell add-ons and new content, but to actually rewrite the game's entire experience, it prompts us to consider our own orientation to digital gaming. How much should we value the speculative future of a game over the game we presently own (to the degree we even own these games anymore)? How much does a game's possible revision influence our attempts to hold the industry accountable for substandard development practices, predatory business models, or empty promises? Can we, the audience, use the precedent of digital change to push the industry toward better development and publishing practices? Digital revisionism does not solely involve the changes made to a game because those changes do not and cannot happen in a vacuum, independent from the context of its production and reception. We can view post-release development trends as an indication that media producers can constantly reinvent themselves, perpetually innovate the media text as an experience, redesign and intensify economic appeals, use the rhetoric of updating to stave off failure, sell audiences on a (potentially illusory) future of media, and prolong the commodity's life cycle indefinitely. Through these industry practices, game producers capitalize on a text's inherent flexibility while framing their iterative control over digital gaming as an inevitable feature of contemporary online media.

Even so, audiences are not passive observers in this process and their participation on the periphery of gaming still holds the potential to move these changes toward their own values and desires. The question then becomes what that change ultimately looks like. If audiences seek greater transparency over post-release updates and expansions to a game and for developers to be held accountable for how they revise these texts, then the indie gaming trend of early access releases could provide an intriguing model for triple-A development as well. Admittedly, these

releases still encourage free labor from their audience by asking them to report on bugs and errors and give feedback on their play experience, but there is at least a clear understanding that the audience is not buying a finished product (and the game's price point usually reflects that fact as well).²⁹ In another trend toward transparency, the popular 'gacha' game *Genshin Impact* (2020) posted the low odds for their randomized loot box mechanics within the game's interface, though the larger structure of the game still has many deceptive or subtle appeals to convince players to buy into their lopsided reward system. Ultimately, these examples of transparency offer players imperfect half-measures but at least point to signs that the industry can be held more accountable for its updating practices and digital business models. In order to push these changes further, though, players need to consistently demand a version of digital gaming that is open and transparent, largely delivers on the industry's promises, and is ideally freed of the more excessive and predatory efforts to tie online play to commerce. However, to have an influence on these changes, audiences must understand the way revisionism can slowly remap the fault lines of their struggles and take a longer view of change not just as a future potential of gaming but as a pressing demand.

²⁹ Note: It's also worth pointing out that depending on the case the level of transparency in early access games can still be uneven. For example, some developers may be unclear on exactly how long the game will remain in open access with some titles seemingly languishing in this unfinished state for several years. Additionally, early access may function more as a glorified play demo or a compliment to crowdfund efforts.

Appendices

Appendix A – DLC Release Information for Xbox 360 Titles (2005-2007)

Xbox 360 – Year 1

Xbox 360 Game	Release Date	Traditional Retail or Digital Only	Genre	DLC or Stand-Alone	DLC Details (If Applicable)
<i>Kameo: Elements of Power</i>	Nov 7, 2005	Traditional Retail	Action-Adventure	DLC (Nov 2005, Apr 2005, Sep 2005)	6 Add-Ons with Co-Op Additions, Skins/Character packs (2 Free, 4 Priced)
<i>NHL 2K6</i>	Nov 16, 2005	Traditional Retail	Sports	Stand-Alone	
<i>Gun</i>	Nov 16, 2005	Traditional Retail	Action	Stand-Alone	
<i>Madden NFL 06</i>	Nov 16, 2005	Traditional Retail	Sports	Stand-Alone	
<i>NBA 2K6</i>	Nov 16, 2005	Traditional Retail	Sports	Stand-Alone	
<i>Need for Speed: Most Wanted</i>	Nov 16, 2005	Traditional Retail	Racing	Stand-Alone	
<i>FIFA 06: Road to FIFA World Cup</i>	Nov 16, 2005	Traditional Retail	Sports	Stand-Alone	
<i>NBA Live 06</i>	Nov 16, 2005	Traditional Retail	Sports	Stand-Alone	
<i>Amped 3</i>	Nov 16, 2005	Traditional Retail	Sports	Stand-Alone	
<i>Project Gotham Racing 3</i>	Nov 16, 2005	Traditional Retail	Racing	DLC (Apr 2006, May 2006, Jul 2006)	3 Add-On Car Packs (1 Free, 2 Priced)
<i>Tiger Woods PGA Tour 06</i>	Nov 16, 2005	Traditional Retail	Sports	Stand-Alone	
<i>Tony Hawk's American Wasteland</i>	Nov 16, 2005	Traditional Retail	Sports	Stand-Alone	
<i>Condemned: Criminal Origins</i>	Nov 16, 2005	Traditional Retail	Survival Horror	Stand-Alone	
<i>Ridge Racer 6</i>	Nov 17, 2005	Traditional Retail	Racing	DLC (Dec 2005, Jan 2006, Feb 2006, Mar 2006, Apr 2006, May 2006)	41 Add-On Music Tracks (41 Priced)
<i>Call of Duty 2</i>	Nov 17, 2005	Traditional Retail	Shooter	DLC (May 2006, Jun 2006)	3 Add-On Map Packs (1 Free, 2 Priced)

<i>Perfect Dark Zero</i>	Nov 17, 2005	Traditional Retail	Shooter	DLC (Jun 2006, Nov 2006)	2 Add-On Map Packs (1 Free, 1 Priced)
<i>Quake 4</i>	Nov 18, 2005	Traditional Retail	Shooter	Stand-Alone	
<i>Peter Jackson's King Kong</i>	Nov 21, 2005	Traditional Retail	Action-Adventure	Stand-Alone	
<i>Zuma Deluxe</i>	Nov 22, 2005	Digital Only	Puzzle	Stand-Alone	
<i>Gauntlet</i>	Nov 22, 2005	Digital Only	Classics	Stand-Alone	
<i>Outpost Kaloki X</i>	Nov 22, 2005	Digital Only	Strategy	DLC (Nov 2005, Jan 2006, Feb 2006)	5 Add-On Scenarios (3 Free, 2 Priced)
<i>Hexic HD</i>	Nov 22, 2005	Digital Only	Puzzle	Stand-Alone	
<i>Bankshot Billiards 2</i>	Nov 22, 2005	Digital Only	Sports	Stand-Alone	
<i>Geometry Wars: Retro Evolved</i>	Nov 22, 2005	Digital Only	Arcade Shooter	Stand-Alone	
<i>Joust</i>	Nov 22, 2005	Digital Only	Classics	Stand-Alone	
<i>Bejeweled 2 Deluxe</i>	Nov 22, 2005	Digital Only	Puzzle	Stand-Alone	
<i>Mutant Storm Reloaded</i>	Nov 22, 2005	Digital Only	Shooter	Stand-Alone	
<i>Smash T.V.</i>	Nov 24, 2005	Digital Only	Classics	Stand-Alone	
<i>Hardwood Backgammon</i>	Dec 8, 2005	Digital Only	Card Game	Stand-Alone	
<i>Hardwood Hearts</i>	Dec 8, 2005	Digital Only	Card Game	Stand-Alone	
<i>Hardwood Spades</i>	Dec 8, 2005	Digital Only	Card Game	Stand-Alone	
<i>Wik and the Fable of Souls</i>	Dec 14, 2005	Digital Only	Platformer	Stand-Alone	
<i>Robotron: 2084</i>	Dec 16, 2005	Digital Only	Shooter	Stand-Alone	
<i>Dead or Alive 4</i>	Dec 29, 2005	Traditional Retail	Fighting	Stand-Alone	

Xbox 360 – Year 2

Xbox 360 Game	Release Date	Traditional Retail or Digital Only	Genre	DLC or Stand-Alone	DLC Details (If Applicable)
<i>Marble Blast Ultra</i>	Jan 23, 2006	Digital Only	Puzzle/Platformer	DLC (Sep 2008, Nov 2008, Dec 2008)	3 Add-Ons with Expansion Packs (3 Priced)
<i>Crystal Quest</i>	Feb 5, 2006	Digital Only	Puzzle	DLC (Feb 2006)	5 Add-Ons with Graphics Packs, Sound Packs (5 Priced)
<i>Full Auto</i>	Feb 14, 2006	Traditional Retail	Racing	Stand-Alone	
<i>Fight Night Round 3</i>	Feb 20, 2006	Traditional Retail	Sports	Stand-Alone	
<i>Jewel Quest</i>	Mar 3, 2006	Digital Only	Puzzle	Stand-Alone	
<i>Burnout Revenge</i>	Mar 7, 2006	Traditional Retail	Racing	DLC (Apr 2006)	7 Add-On Car Skins (7 Free)
<i>College Hoops 2K6</i>	Mar 7, 2006	Traditional Retail	Sports	Stand-Alone	
<i>Tom Clancy's Ghost Recon Advanced Warfighter</i>	Mar 9, 2006	Traditional Retail	Shooter	DLC (Jun 2006)	1 Expansion Pack with New Maps, Player Mode, Guns (1 Priced)
<i>Feeding Frenzy</i>	Mar 10, 2006	Digital Only	Action	Stand-Alone	
<i>The Outfit</i>	Mar 13, 2006	Traditional Retail	Strategy, Shooter	Stand-Alone	
<i>The Elder Scrolls IV: Oblivion</i>	Mar 20, 2006	Traditional Retail	RPG	DLC (Apr 2006, May 2006, Sep 2006, Nov 2006, Mar 2007, Oct 2007)	9 Add-ons and Expansion Packs with Skins, Level Upgrades, New Areas, New Quests (9 Priced)
<i>AstroPop</i>	Mar 22, 2006	Digital Only	Puzzle	Stand-Alone	
<i>Blazing Angels: Squadrons of WWII</i>	Mar 23, 2006	Traditional Retail	Action, Flight Simulator	Stand-Alone	
<i>Dynasty Warriors 5 Empires</i>	Mar 28, 2006	Traditional Retail	Action, RPG	Stand-Alone	
<i>Far Cry Instincts Predator</i>	Mar 28, 2006	Traditional Retail	Shooter	Stand-Alone	

<i>Rumble Roses XX</i>	Mar 28, 2006	Traditional Retail	Fighter	DLC (Jun 2007, Jul 2007, Aug 2007)	61 Add-On Costume Skins (61 Priced)
<i>Top Spin 2</i>	Mar 29, 2006	Traditional Retail	Sports	Stand-Alone	
<i>Major League Baseball 2K6</i>	Apr 10, 2006	Traditional Retail	Sports	Stand-Alone	
<i>Tomb Raider: Legend</i>	Apr 11, 2006	Traditional Retail	Platformer	DLC (Nov 2007)	2 Expansion Packs (2 Priced)
<i>Battlefield 2: Modern Combat</i>	Apr 11, 2006	Traditional Retail	Shooter	Stand-Alone	
<i>Final Fantasy XI</i>	Apr 18, 2006	Traditional Retail	RPG	DLC (Jul 2009, Nov 2009)	2 Expansion Packs (2 Priced)
<i>FIFA World Cup: Germany 2006</i>	Apr 24, 2006	Traditional Retail	Sports	Stand-Alone	
<i>Uno</i>	May 9, 2006	Digital Only	Card Game	Stand-Alone	
<i>X-Men: The Official Game</i>	May 16, 2006	Traditional Retail	Action	Stand-Alone	
<i>Rockstar Games presents Table Tennis</i>	May 22, 2006	Traditional Retail	Sports	Stand-Alone	
<i>Hitman: Blood Money</i>	May 30, 2006	Traditional Retail	Action, Shooter	Stand-Alone	
<i>MotoGP '06</i>	Jun 12, 2006	Traditional Retail	Sports	Stand-Alone	
<i>Over G Fighters</i>	Jun 27, 2006	Traditional Retail	Flight Simulator	Stand-Alone	
<i>The Lord of the Rings: The Battle for Middle-Earth II</i>	Jul 5, 2006	Traditional Retail	Strategy	DLC (Sep 2006)	1 Add-On Map Pack (1 Paid)
<i>Chromehounds</i>	Jul 11, 2006	Traditional Retail	Action, Strategy	Stand-Alone	
<i>Prey</i>	Jul 11, 2006	Traditional Retail	Shooter	DLC (Oct 2006)	9 Add-Ons with Map Pack and New Characters (9 Free)
<i>Frogger</i>	Jul 12, 2006	Digital Only	Action	Stand-Alone	
<i>NCAA Football 07</i>	Jul 18, 2006	Traditional Retail	Sports	Stand-Alone	
<i>Cloning Clyde</i>	Jul 19, 2006	Digital Only	Puzzle, Platformer	Stand-Alone	

<i>Galaga</i>	Jul 26, 2006	Digital Only	Top Down Shooter	Stand-Alone	
<i>Street Fighter II' Hyper Fighting</i>	Aug 2, 2006	Digital Only	Fighter	Stand-Alone	
<i>Dead Rising</i>	Aug 8, 2006	Traditional Retail	Action-Adventure, Brawler	DLC (Aug 2006, Sep 2006, Jun 2007)	12 Add-On Costume Skins (12 Free)
<i>Pac-Man</i>	Aug 9, 2006	Digital Only	Puzzle	Stand-Alone	
<i>Ninety-Nine Nights</i>	Aug 15, 2006	Traditional Retail	Action, Brawler	Stand-Alone	
<i>Madden NFL 07</i>	Aug 22, 2006	Traditional Retail	Sports	DLC (Oct 2006, Nov 2006)	3 Add-ons with Classic Stadiums and Video Guide (3 Free)
<i>Texas Hold 'Em</i>	Aug 23, 2006	Digital Only	Card Game	Stand-Alone	
<i>World Championship Poker: Featuring Howard Lederer - All In</i>	Aug 29, 2006	Traditional Retail	Card Game	Stand-Alone	
<i>Bomberman: Act Zero</i>	Aug 29, 2006	Traditional Retail	Action	Stand-Alone	
<i>Enchanted Arms</i>	Aug 29, 2006	Traditional Retail	RPG	Stand-Alone	
<i>Saints Row</i>	Aug 29, 2006	Traditional Retail	Action, Sandbox	DLC (Aug 2006, Nov 2006, Dec 2006, Jan 2007)	5 Add-Ons with Skins, New Co-Op Levels, New Maps (2 Free, 3 Priced)
<i>Time Pilot</i>	Aug 30, 2006	Digital Only	Top Down Shooter	Stand-Alone	
<i>Xbox Live Arcade Unplugged Volume 1</i>	Sep 5, 2006	Digital Only	Misc	Stand-Alone	
<i>Test Drive Unlimited</i>	Sep 5, 2006	Traditional Retail	Racing	Stand-Alone	
<i>NHL 07</i>	Sep 12, 2006	Traditional Retail	Sports	Stand-Alone	
<i>NHL 2K7</i>	Sep 12, 2006	Traditional Retail	Sports	Stand-Alone	
<i>Lego Star Wars II: The Original Trilogy</i>	Sep 12, 2006	Traditional Retail	Action Platformer	Stand-Alone	

<i>Scramble</i>	Sep 13, 2006	Digital Only	2D Shooter	Stand-Alone	
<i>Cabela's Alaskan Adventures</i>	Sep 19, 2006	Traditional Retail	Hunting	DLC (Oct 2006)	1 Add-On Bonus Pack (1 Free)
<i>Samurai Warriors 2</i>	Sep 19, 2006	Traditional Retail	Action-Adventure	DLC (Apr 2008)	1 Expansion Pack (1 Priced)
<i>Open Season</i>	Sep 19, 2006	Traditional Retail	Action	Stand-Alone	
<i>The Godfather</i>	Sep 19, 2006	Traditional Retail	Action, Shooter, Sandbox	DLC (Oct 2006, Dec 2007)	13 Add-Ons with New Challenges, Weapons, In-Game Currency (2 Free, 10 Priced)
<i>World Series of Poker: Tournament of Champions</i>	Sep 21, 2006	Traditional Retail	Sports	Stand-Alone	
<i>NBA Live 07</i>	Sep 25, 2006	Traditional Retail	Sports	Stand-Alone	
<i>NBA 2K7</i>	Sep 25, 2006	Traditional Retail	Sports	Stand-Alone	
<i>Import Tuner Challenge</i>	Sep 26, 2006	Traditional Retail	Racing	Stand-Alone	
<i>Doom</i>	Sep 27, 2006	Digital Only	Shooter	Stand-Alone	
<i>Just Cause</i>	Sep 27, 2006	Traditional Retail	Shooter, Action-Adventure	Stand-Alone	
<i>TotemBall</i>	Oct 4, 2006	Digital Only	Platformer, Puzzle	Stand-Alone	
<i>Dig Dug</i>	Oct 11, 2006	Digital Only	Platformer, Puzzle	Stand-Alone	
<i>Tiger Woods PGA Tour 07</i>	Oct 17, 2006	Traditional Retail	Sports	Stand-Alone	
<i>Tom Clancy's Splinter Cell Double Agent</i>	Oct 17, 2006	Traditional Retail	Shooter	DLC (Jul 2007)	1 Expansion with New Maps, Challenges, Skins (1 Free)
<i>Lumines Live!</i>	Oct 18, 2006	Digital Only	Puzzle	Stand-Alone	
<i>Ultimate Mortal Kombat 3</i>	Oct 22, 2006	Digital Only	Fighter	Stand-Alone	
<i>Cars</i>	Oct 23, 2006	Traditional Retail	Driving	Stand-Alone	
<i>Jetpac Refuelled</i>	Oct 24, 2006	Digital Only	Action, Shooter, Platformer	Stand-Alone	

<i>Marvel: Ultimate Alliance</i>	Oct 24, 2006	Traditional Retail	Action	DLC (Apr 2007)	4 Add-Ons with New Character Packs (1 Free, 3 Priced)
<i>Phantasy Star Universe</i>	Oct 25, 2006	Traditional Retail	RPG	DLC (Nov 2007)	1 Expansion Pack with New missions, New Weapons (1 Priced)
<i>FIFA 07 Soccer</i>	Oct 31, 2006	Traditional Retail	Sports	Stand-Alone	
<i>Need for Speed Carbon</i>	Oct 31, 2006	Traditional Retail	Racing	Stand-Alone	
<i>F.E.A.R.</i>	Oct 31, 2006	Traditional Retail	Shooter	Stand-Alone	
<i>Tony Hawk's Project 8</i>	Nov 7, 2006	Traditional Retail	Sports	Stand-Alone	
<i>Call of Duty 3</i>	Nov 7, 2006	Traditional Retail	Shooter	DLC (Jan 2007, May 2007)	3 Add-Ons Map Packs (1 Free, 2 Priced)
<i>Gears of War</i>	Nov 7, 2006	Traditional Retail	Shooter	DLC (Jan 2007, May 2007)	2 Add-On Map Packs (1 Free, 1 Priced)
<i>Contra</i>	Nov 8, 2006	Digital Only	Arcade Shooter	Stand-Alone	
<i>Viva Pinata</i>	Nov 9, 2006	Traditional Retail	Farm Sim, Strategy	Stand-Alone	
<i>Blitz: The League</i>	Nov 13, 2006	Traditional Retail	Sports	Stand-Alone	
<i>Dead or Alive Xtreme 2</i>	Nov 13, 2006	Traditional Retail	Volleyball, Dating Sim	DLC (Dec 2006)	1 Add-On Costume Pack (1 Free)
<i>The History Channel: Civil War - A Nation Divided</i>	Nov 14, 2006	Traditional Retail	Shooter	Stand-Alone	
<i>Eragon</i>	Nov 14, 2006	Traditional Retail	Action-Adventure	Stand-Alone	
<i>WWE Smackdown vs. Raw 2007</i>	Nov 14, 2006	Traditional Retail	Sports	Stand-Alone	
<i>Sonic the Hedgehog</i>	Nov 14, 2006	Traditional Retail	Platformer	Stand-Alone	
<i>Bionicle Heroes</i>	Nov 15, 2006	Traditional Retail	Action, Shooter	Stand-Alone	
<i>Defender</i>	Nov 15, 2006	Digital Only	Arcade Shooter	Stand-Alone	
<i>Sneak King</i>	Nov 19, 2006	Traditional Retail/Special	Action	Stand-Alone	

		Promotion with Burger King			
<i>Big Bumpin'</i>	Nov 19, 2006	Traditional Retail/Special Promotion with Burger King	Action, Driving	Stand-Alone	
<i>Pocketbike Racer</i>	Nov 19, 2006	Traditional Retail/Special Promotion with Burger King	Action, Driving	Stand-Alone	
<i>College Hoops 2K7</i>	Nov 20, 2006	Traditional Retail	Sports	DLC (Nov 2006)	1 Add-On 2K ReelMaker Highlight Reels (1 Priced)
<i>Tom Clancy's Rainbow Six Vegas</i>	Nov 20, 2006	Traditional Retail	Shooter	DLC (Apr 2007, Jun 2007)	2 Add-On Map Packs (1 Free, 1 Priced)
<i>Superman Returns</i>	Nov 20, 2006	Traditional Retail	Action-Adventure	Stand-Alone	
<i>Rapala Tournament Fishing!</i>	Nov 21, 2006	Traditional Retail	Sports	DLC (Dec 2006)	1 Add-On Bonus Level (1 Priced)
<i>Cabela's African Safari</i>	Nov 21, 2006	Traditional Retail	Hunting	DLC (Dec 2006)	1 Add-On Bonus Level (1 Priced)
<i>Small Arms</i>	Nov 22, 2006	Digital Only	Fighter	DLC (Jun 2006)	1 Add-On Character Pack (1 Priced)
<i>RoboBlitz</i>	Nov 28, 2006	Digital Only	Action, Puzzle	Stand-Alone	
<i>Pimp My Ride</i>	Dec 6, 2006	Traditional Retail	Driving	Stand-Alone	
<i>Star Trek: Legacy</i>	Dec 12, 2006	Traditional Retail	Action, Strategy	Stand-Alone	
<i>Assault Heroes</i>	Dec 13, 2006	Digital Only	Action, Top Down Shooter	Stand-Alone	
<i>Novadrome</i>	Dec 20, 2006	Digital Only	Action, Driving	DLC (Mar 2007)	1 Add-On Bonus Pack (1 Priced)
<i>New Rally-X</i>	Dec 27, 2006	Digital Only	Action, Driving	Stand-Alone	

Xbox 360 – Year 3

Xbox 360 Game	Release Date	Traditional Retail or Digital Only	Genre	DLC or Stand-Alone	DLC Details (If Applicable)
Ms. Pac-Man	Jan 10, 2007	Digital Only	Action	Stand-Alone	
Lost Planet: Extreme Condition	Jan 12, 2007	Traditional Retail	Shooter	DLC (Dec 2007)	4 Add-On Map Packs (1 Free, 3 Priced)
NCAA March Madness 07	Jan 17, 2007	Traditional Retail	Sports	Stand-Alone	
Heavy Weapon: Atomic Tank	Jan 17, 2007	Digital Only	Shooter	Stand-Alone	
Fuzion Frenzy 2	Jan 30, 2007	Traditional Retail	Puzzle	Stand-Alone	
Battlestations: Midway	Jan 30, 2007	Traditional Retail	Action, Strategy	DLC (Mar 2007)	1 Add-On Mission Pack (1 Priced)
Winning Eleven: Pro Evolution Soccer 2007	Feb 6, 2007	Traditional Retail	Sports	Stand-Alone	
Root Beer Tapper	Feb 7, 2007	Digital Only	Strategy	Stand-Alone	
Paperboy	Feb 14, 2007	Digital Only	Action	Stand-Alone	
NBA Street Homecourt	Feb 20, 2007	Traditional Retail	Sports	DLC (May 2007)	1 Add-On Costume Pack (Priced)
Crackdown	Feb 20, 2007	Traditional Retail	Action, Sandbox	DLC (May 2007)	2 Add-Ons with New Playmodes, Weapons, Vehicles, Achievements (1 Free, 1 Priced)
Major League Baseball 2K7	Feb 26, 2007	Traditional Retail	Sports	Stand-Alone	
Samurai Warriors 2 Empires	Feb 27, 2007	Traditional Retail	Action, Strategy	Stand-Alone	
Dance Dance Revolution Universe	Feb 27, 2007	Traditional Retail	Music, Rhythm	DLC (Dec 2008)	1 Add-On Song Mega Pack (1 Priced)
Bullet Witch	Feb 27, 2007	Traditional Retail	Action-Adventure, Shooter	DLC (Mar 2007, Apr 2007, May 2007, Jun 2007)	22 Add-Ons with New Missions, Costumes, Difficulty Settings (5 Free, 17 Priced)
Alien Hominid HD	Feb 28, 2007	Digital Only	Action, Shooter, Platformer	DLC (Apr 2007, May 2007, Jun 2007, Jul 2007)	5 Add-On New levels (5 Priced)

Tom Clancy's Ghost Recon Advanced Warfighter 2	Mar 6, 2007	Traditional Retail	Shooter	DLC (Jan, 2008, Aug 2008)	3 Add-Ons with Map Packs, Weapons (1 Free, 2 Priced)
Def Jam: Icon	Mar 6, 2007	Traditional Retail	Fighting, Music, Rhythm	Stand-Alone	
Worms	Mar 7, 2007	Digital Only	Shooter	Stand-Alone	
Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtles: 1989 Classic Arcade	Mar 14, 2007	Digital Only	Action	Stand-Alone	
Tetris Evolution	Mar 19, 2007	Digital Only	Puzzle	Stand-Alone	
UEFA Champions League 2006-2007	Mar 20, 2007	Traditional Retail	Sports	Stand-Alone	
TMNT	Mar 20, 2007	Digital Only	Action, Brawler	Stand-Alone	
Virtua Tennis 3	Mar 20, 2007	Traditional Retail	Sports	Stand-Alone	
Armored Core 4	Mar 20, 2007	Traditional Retail	Shooter	Stand-Alone	
Earth Defense Force 2017	Mar 20, 2007	Traditional Retail	Action, Shooter	Stand-Alone	
Castlevania: Symphony of the Night	Mar 21, 2007	Digital Only	Platformer	Stand-Alone	
Disney's Meet the Robinsons	Mar 27, 2007	Traditional Retail	Shooter, Action-Adventure	Stand-Alone	
Guitar Hero II	Apr 3, 2007	Traditional Retail	Music, Rhythm	DLC (Mar 2007, Jul 2007, Aug 2007, Sep 2007, Oct 2007, Nov 2007)	10 Expansions Music Track Packs (10 Priced) [Note: 5 Additional Individual Music Tracks Released]
Luxor 2	Apr 4, 2007	Digital Only	Puzzle	Stand-Alone	
Boom Boom Rocket	Apr 11, 2007	Digital Only	Music	DLC (Nov 2007)	1 Add-in Music Pack (1 Priced)
Gyrruss	Apr 18, 2007	Digital Only	Shooter	Stand-Alone	
3D Ultra MiniGolf Adventures	Apr 18, 2007	Digital Only	Sports	DLC (Jul 2007)	1 Add-On New Course (1 Priced)

Rayman Raving Rabbids	Apr 24, 2007	Traditional Retail	Misc	Stand-Alone	
Eets: Chowdown	Apr 25, 2007	Digital Only	Puzzle	DLC (Aug 2007, Sep 2007)	2 Add-On New Levels (2 Priced)
Pinball FX	Apr 25, 2007	Digital Only	Pinball	DLC (Oct 2007, Jan 2008, Apr 2008, Sep 2008, Nov 2008)	5 Add-On Tables (1 Free, 4 Priced)
Centipede & Millipede	May 2, 2007	Digital Only	Arcade Shooter	Stand-Alone	
Catan	May 2, 2007	Digital Only	Strategy, Board Game	DLC (May 2007, Jun 2007)	2 Add-Ons with New Characters, Artwork Skins (2 Priced)
Spider-Man 3	May 4, 2007	Traditional Retail	Action-Adventure, Sandbox	DLC (Oct 2007)	1 Add-On New Playable Character (1 Priced)
Command & Conquer 3: Tiberium Wars	May 8, 2007	Traditional Retail	Shooter	Stand-Alone	
Double Dragon	May 9, 2007	Digital Only	Fighter	Stand-Alone	
DreamsWorks Shrek the Third	May 15, 2007	Traditional Retail	Action	Stand-Alone	
Aegis Wing	May 16, 2007	Digital Only	Arcade Shooter	Stand-Alone	
Soltrio Solitaire	May 16, 2007	Digital Only	Card Game	Stand-Alone	
Disney's Pirates of the Caribbean: At World's End	May 22, 2007	Traditional Retail	Action-Adventure	Stand-Alone	
Xevious	May 23, 2007	Digital Only	Arcade Shooter	Stand-Alone	
Rush'n Attack	May 23, 2007	Digital Only	Action, Platformer	Stand-Alone	
Forza Motorsport 2	May 29, 2007	Traditional Retail	Racing	DLC (Mar 2007, Sep 2007, Oct 2007, Dec 2007)	5 Add-Ons with Track Packs and Car Packs (5 priced)
WarTech: Senko no Ronde	May 29, 2007	Traditional Retail	Fighter, Shooter	Stand-Alone	
Shadowrun	May 29, 2007	Traditional Retail	Shooter	Stand-Alone	
Surf's Up	May 30, 2007	Traditional Retail	Sports	Stand-Alone	
Mad Tracks	May 30, 2007	Digital Only	Racing	Stand-Alone	

Pac-Man Championship Edition	Jun 6, 2007	Digital Only	Action	Stand-Alone	
Call of Juarez	Jun 7, 2007	Traditional Retail	Action-Adventure, Shooter	Stand-Alone	
Tenchu Z	Jun 12, 2007	Traditional Retail	Action-Adventure	Stand-Alone	
Monster Madness: Battle for Suburbia	Jun 12, 2007	Traditional Retail	Action, Shooter	Stand-Alone	
Prince of Persia Classic	Jun 13, 2007	Digital Only	Action, Platformer	Stand-Alone	
Fantastic Four: Rise of Silver Surfer	Jun 15, 2007	Traditional Retail	Action, Brawler	Stand-Alone	
DiRT	Jun 19, 2007	Traditional Retail	Racing	Stand-Alone	
Band of Bugs	Jun 20, 2007	Digital Only	Turn Based Strategy	DLC (July 2007, Aug 2007, Sep 2007, Oct 2007, July 2009)	6 Add-Ons with Map Packs, New Campaigns (1 Free, 5 Priced)
Hour of Victory	Jun 25, 2007	Traditional Retail	Shooter	Stand-Alone	
Harry Potter and the Order of the Phoenix	Jun 25, 2007	Traditional Retail	Action-Adventure	Stand-Alone	
The Bigs	Jun 25, 2007	Traditional Retail	Sports	Stand-Alone	
The Darkness	Jun 25, 2007	Traditional Retail	Action, Shooter	Stand-Alone	
Ratatouille	Jun 26, 2007	Traditional Retail	Action-Adventure, Platformer	Stand-Alone	
Overlord	Jun 26, 2007	Traditional Retail	Action Role-Playing	DLC (Feb 2008)	1 Expansion Pack (1 Priced)
Transformers: The Game	Jun 26, 2007	Traditional Retail	Action	DLC (Jan 2008)	1 Add-On Unlocks Game's Locked Features (1 Priced)
Carcassonne	Jun 27, 2007	Digital Only	Strategy, Board Game	DLC (Aug 2007, Oct 2007)	2 Expansion Packs (2 Priced)
Vampire Rain	Jul 3, 2007	Traditional Retail	Shooter, Action-Adventure	Stand-Alone	

Missile Command	Jul 4, 2007	Digital Only	Arcade Shooter	Stand-Alone	
Project Sylpheed: Arc of Deception	Jul 10, 2007	Traditional Retail	Action, Flight Simulator	Stand-Alone	
Golden Axe	Jul 11, 2007	Digital Only	Brawler	Stand-Alone	
Sonic the Hedgehog	Jul 11, 2007	Digital Only	Platformer	Stand-Alone	
All-Pro Football 2K8	Jul 16, 2007	Traditional Retail	Sports	DLC (Jul 2007)	1 Add-On 2K ReelMaker (1 Priced)
NCAA Football 08	Jul 17, 2007	Traditional Retail	Sports	Stand-Alone	
Bomberman Live	Jul 18, 2007	Digital Only	Action, Puzzle	DLC (Aug 2007, Sep 2007, Dec 2007)	3 Expansion Packs with New Maps, New Characters (3 Priced)
Yie Ar Kung-Fu	Jul 18, 2007	Digital Only	Fighter	Stand-Alone	
Nascar 08	Jul 23, 2007	Traditional Retail	Racing	Stand-Alone	
Wing Commander Arena	Jul 25, 2007	Digital Only	Action, Shooter	Stand-Alone	
Super Contra	Jul 25, 2007	Digital Only	Arcade Shooter	Stand-Alone	
Marathon 2: Durandal	Aug 1, 2007	Digital Only	Action, First-Person Shooter	DLC (Jul 2008)	2 Add-On Map Packs (2 Priced)
Spyglass Board Games	Aug 1, 2007	Digital Only	Board Game	Stand-Alone	
Track & Field	Aug 8, 2007	Digital Only	Sports	Stand-Alone	
Madden NFL 08	Aug 14, 2007	Traditional Retail	Sports	Stand-Alone	
Ecco the Dolphin	Aug 15, 2007	Digital Only	Action-Adventure	Stand-Alone	
Hexic 2	Aug 15, 2007	Digital Only	Puzzle	Stand-Alone	
BioShock	Aug 21, 2007	Traditional Retail	Shooter	Stand-Alone (Note: PS3 Port Featured DLC)	
Space Giraffe	Aug 22, 2007	Digital Only	Shooter	Stand-Alone	
Street Trace: NYC	Aug 22, 2007	Digital Only	Racing, Shooter	Stand-Alone	

Two Worlds	Aug 23, 2007	Traditional Retail	Racing	Stand-Alone	
Dynasty Warriors: Gundam	Aug 28, 2007	Traditional Retail	Action, Brawler	Stand-Alone	
Tiger Woods PGA Tour 08	Aug 28, 2007	Traditional Retail	Sports	Stand-Alone	
Stuntman: Ignition	Aug 28, 2007	Traditional Retail	Racing	DLC (Nov 2007, Dec 2007)	2 Expansion Packs with New Levels, New Vehicles, New Game Mode (2 Priced)
Blue Dragon	Aug 28, 2007	Traditional Retail	RPG	DLC (Oct 2007, Nov 2007)	3 Add-Ons with New Game Difficulty Modes, New Items, New Shuffle Dungeon (1 Free, 2 Priced)
Streets of Rage 2	Aug 29, 2007	Digital Only	Brawler	Stand-Alone	
Super Puzzle Fighter II Turbo HD Remix	Aug 29, 2007	Digital Only	Puzzle	Stand-Alone	
Medal of Honor: Airborne	Sep 4, 2007	Traditional Retail	Shooter	Stand-Alone	
Fatal Fury Special	Sep 5, 2007	Digital Only	Fighter	Stand-Alone	
Cyberball 2072	Sep 5, 2007	Digital Only	Sports	Stand-Alone	
John Woo Presents Stranglehold	Sep 5, 2007	Traditional Retail	Shooter	DLC (Jan 2008)	1 Add-On Map Pack (1 Priced)
NHL 2K8	Sep 10, 2007	Traditional Retail	Sports	DLC (Sep 2007)	1 Add-On 2K Reelmaker (1 Priced)
Fatal Inertia	Sep 11, 2007	Traditional Retail	Racing	Stand-Alone	
Kengo: Legend of the 9	Sep 11, 2007	Traditional Retail	Fighter	Stand-Alone	
Sonic the Hedgehog 2	Sep 12, 2007	Digital Only	Platformer	Stand-Alone	
NHL 08	Sep 12, 2007	Traditional Retail	Sports	Stand-Alone	
Skate	Sep 14, 2007	Traditional Retail	Sports	Stand-Alone	
Juiced 2: Hot Import Nights	Sep 17, 2007	Traditional Retail	Racing	Stand-Alone	

Eternal Sonata	Sep 17, 2007	Traditional Retail	RPG	DLC (Sep 2007)	1 Add-On Unlocks Locked Music (1 Priced)
Warriors Orochi	Sep 18, 2007	Traditional Retail	Action, RPG	Stand-Alone	
Blazing Angels 2: Secret Missions of WWII	Sep 18, 2007	Traditional Retail	Action, Flight Simulator	Stand-Alone	
Cabela's Trophy Bucks	Sep 19, 2007	Traditional Retail	Sports, Shooter	Stand-Alone	
GEON: emotions	Sep 19, 2007	Digital Only	Action, Puzzle	Stand-Alone	
Halo 3	Sep 25, 2007	Traditional Retail	First-Person Shooter	DLC (Dec 2007, Apr 2008, Jul 2008, Apr 2009, Feb 2010)	5 Add-On Map Packs (1 Free, 4 Priced)
Hot Wheels: Beat That!	Sep 26, 2007	Traditional Retail	Racing	Stand-Alone	
World Series of Poker 2008: Battle for the Bracelets	Sep 26, 2007	Traditional Retail	Sports	Stand-Alone	
CSI: Crime Scene Investigation - Hard Evidence	Sep 26, 2007	Traditional Retail	Adventure	Stand-Alone	
NBA Live 08	Oct 1, 2007	Traditional Retail	Sports	Stand-Alone	
NBA 2K8	Oct 2, 2007	Traditional Retail	Sports	Stand-Alone	
Spider-Man: Friend or Foe	Oct 2, 2007	Traditional Retail	Action, Brawler	Stand-Alone	
Project Gotham Racing 4	Oct 2, 2007	Traditional Retail	Racing	DLC (Feb 2008)	2 Expansion Pack with New Multiplayer Modes, New Achievements, New Cars (1 Free, 1 Priced)
FlatOut: Ultimate Carnage	Oct 2, 2007	Traditional Retail	Racing	Stand-Alone	
Tetris Splash	Oct 3, 2007	Digital Only	Puzzle	Stand-Alone	
Crash of the Titans	Oct 4, 2007	Traditional Retail	Platformer, Action-Adventure	Stand-Alone	

Thrillville: Off the Rails	Oct 9, 2007	Traditional Retail	Strategy, Simulation	Stand-Alone	
FIFA Soccer 08	Oct 9, 2007	Traditional Retail	Sports	Stand-Alone	
Looney Tunes: Acme Arsenal	Oct 9, 2007	Traditional Retail	Action, Shooter, Platformer	Stand-Alone	
Sega Rally Revo	Oct 9, 2007	Traditional Retail	Racing	Stand-Alone	
Yaris	Oct 10, 2007	Digital Only	Racing, Shooter	Stand-Alone	
Puzzle Quest: Challenge of the Warlords	Oct 10, 2007	Digital Only	Puzzle, RPG	DLC (Jul 2008)	1 Expansion Pack with New Quests, New Spells, New Items)
The Orange Box	Oct 10, 2007	Traditional Retail	Puzzle, Shooter	Stand-Alone	
Tony Hawk's Proving Ground	Oct 15, 2007	Traditional Retail	Sports	Stand-Alone	
Beautiful Katamari	Oct 16, 2007	Traditional Retail	Action, Puzzle	DLC (Nov 2007, Dec 2007, Sep 2008)	16 Add-Ons with New Levels, Game Progression Cheats, Unlock Accessories (16 Paid)
Speedball 2: Brutal Deluxe	Oct 17, 2007	Digital Only	Action, Sports	Stand-Alone	
Every Extend Extra Extreme	Oct 17, 2007	Digital Only	Arcade Shooter	Stand-Alone	
Xbox Live Arcade Compilation Disc	Oct 23, 2007	Traditional Retail	Misc	Stand-Alone	
Lara Croft Tomb Raider: Anniversary	Oct 23, 2007	Traditional Retail	Action-Adventure	Stand-Alone	
Ace Combat 6: Fires of Liberation	Oct 23, 2007	Traditional Retail	Action, Flight Simulator	DLC (Oct 2007, Nov 2007, Dec 2007, Jan 2008, Feb 2008, Mar 2008, Apr 2008, May 2008, Jun 2008, Jul 2008)	58 Add-Ons with New Missions, New Airplanes (16 Free, 42 Priced)
Conan	Oct 23, 2007	Traditional Retail	Action	Stand-Alone	
Clive Barker's Jericho	Oct 23, 2007	Traditional Retail	Shooter	Stand-Alone	

Exit	Oct 24, 2007	Digital Only	Action, Platformer	Stand-Alone	
Battlestar Galactica	Oct 24, 2007	Digital Only	Shooter, Flight Simulator	Stand-Alone	
Guitar Hero III: Legends of Rock	Oct 28, 2007	Traditional Retail	Music, Rhythm	DLC (Nov 2007, Dec 2007, Feb 2008, Mar 2008, May 2008, Jun 2008, Jul 2008, Aug 2008, Sep 2008)	23 Expansion Music Track Packs (5 Free, 18 Priced) [Note: 9 Additional Individual Music Tracks Released]
Cars Mater - National Championship	Oct 29, 2007	Traditional Retail	Racing	Stand-Alone	
Viva Pinata: Party Animals	Oct 30, 2007	Traditional Retail	Misc	Stand-Alone	
Bee Movie Game	Oct 30, 2007	Traditional Retail	Action-Adventure	Stand-Alone	
The Simpsons Game	Oct 30, 2007	Traditional Retail	Action-Adventure, Platformer	Stand-Alone	
Virtua Fighter 5 Online	Oct 30, 2007	Traditional Retail	Fighter	Stand-Alone	
Naruto: Rise of the Ninja	Oct 30, 2007	Traditional Retail	Action-Adventure, Fighter	Stand-Alone	
TimeShift	Oct 30, 2007	Traditional Retail	Shooter	DLC (May 2008)	2 Add-On Map Packs (1 Free, 1 Priced)
Mutant Storm Empire	Oct 31, 2007	Digital Only	Arcade Shooter	Stand-Alone	
Call of Duty 4: Modern Warfare	Nov 5, 2007	Traditional Retail	First Person Shooter	DLC (April 2008)	1 Add-On Map Pack (1 Priced)
Scene It? Lights, Camera, Action	Nov 6, 2007	Traditional Retail	Board Game	Stand-Alone	
F.E.A.R. Files	Nov 6, 2007	Traditional Retail	Shooter	Stand-Alone	
LEGO Star Wars: The Complete Saga	Nov 6, 2007	Traditional Retail	Action-Adventure	Stand-Alone	
Bladestorm: The Hundred Years' War	Nov 6, 2007	Traditional Retail	Action, Strategy, RPG	Stand-Alone	
Cabela's Big Game Hunter	Nov 7, 2007	Traditional Retail	Hunting, Shooter	DLC (Dec 2007)	1 Add-On Rifle and Sheep Pack (1 Priced)

Word Puzzle	Nov 7, 2007	Digital Only	Puzzle	Stand-Alone	
Switchball	Nov 7, 2007	Digital Only	Platformer, Puzzle	Stand-Alone	
BlackSite: Area 51	Nov 12, 2007	Traditional Retail	Shooter	Stand-Alone	
Monster Jam	Nov 13, 2007	Traditional Retail	Racing	Stand-Alone	
Beowulf: The Game	Nov 13, 2007	Traditional Retail	Action-Adventure	Stand-Alone	
Soldier of Fortune: Payback	Nov 13, 2007	Traditional Retail	Shooter	Stand-Alone	
WWE SmackDown vs. Raw 2008	Nov 13, 2007	Traditional Retail	Fighter	DLC (Mar 2009, Apr 2009)	1 Add-On Character Packs
Kane & Lynch: Dead Men	Nov 13, 2007	Traditional Retail	Action, Shooter	DLC (Apr 2008)	1 Add-On Map Pack (1 Free)
Assassin's Creed	Nov 13, 2007	Traditional Retail	Action-Adventure	Stand-Alone	
Shrek-N-Roll	Nov 14, 2007	Digital Only	Puzzle	Stand-Alone	
Screwjumper!	Nov 14, 2007	Digital Only	Action	Stand-Alone	
ESA Holiday Bundle	Nov 15, 2007	Traditional Retail	Misc	Stand-Alone	
PopCap Arcade Vol 1	Nov 15, 2007	Traditional Retail	Misc	Stand-Alone	
America's Army: True Soldiers	Nov 15, 2007	Traditional Retail	Shooter	Stand-Alone	
Need for Speed ProStreet	Nov 15, 2007	Traditional Retail	Racing	Stand-Alone	
College Hoops 2K8	Nov 19, 2007	Traditional Retail	Sports	DLC (Nov 2008)	1 Add-On 2K ReelMaker (1 Priced)
Avatar: The Last Airbender - The Burning Earth	Nov 19, 2007	Traditional Retail	Brawler, Action-Adventure	Stand-Alone	
Rock Band	Nov 20, 2007	Traditional Retail	Music	DLC (Consistent Releases Between Jun 2008-Mar 2017)	[Note: Both Expansion Music Track Packs and Individual Songs Number Well into the Hundreds. Majority of Material Priced.]
Mass Effect	Nov 20, 2007	Traditional Retail	Action RPG	DLC (Mar 2008, Aug 2009)	2 Expansion Packs (2 Priced)

Undertow	Nov 21, 2007	Digital Only	Action, Side Scrolling Shooter	DLC (Mar 2009)	1 Expansion Pack with New Levels, New Multiplayer Maps, New Playable Character (1 Priced)
Asteroids & Deluxe	Nov 28, 2007	Digital Only	Arcade Shooter	Stand-Alone	
The History Channel: Battle for the Pacific	Dec 4, 2007	Traditional Retail	Shooter	Stand-Alone	
Dance Dance Revolution Universe 2	Dec 4, 2007	Traditional Retail	Music/Rhythm	Stand-Alone	
The Golden Compass	Dec 4, 2007	Traditional Retail	Action-Adventure	Stand-Alone	
NCAA March Madness 08	Dec 11, 2007	Traditional Retail	Sports	Stand-Alone	
GripShift	Dec 12, 2007	Digital Only	Action, Driving	DLC (Feb 2008)	1 Expansion Pack (1 Priced)
Arkadian Warriors	Dec 12, 2007	Digital Only	Action-Adventure, RPG	Stand-Alone	
MX vs ATV Untamed	Dec 17, 2007	Traditional Retail	Racing	Stand-Alone	
Tempest	Dec 19, 2007	Digital Only	Arcade Shooter	Stand-Alone	
Sensible World of Soccer	Dec 19, 2007	Digital Only	Sports	Stand-Alone	
SpongeBob SquarePants: Underpants Slam!	Dec 26, 2007	Digital Only	Action	Stand-Alone	

Appendix B - DLC Release Information for PlayStation 3 Titles (2006-2007)

PlayStation 3 – Year One

PlayStation 3 Game	Release Date	Traditional Retail or Digital Only	Genre	DLC or Stand-Alone	DLC Details (If Applicable)
NBA 2K7	Nov 13, 2006	Traditional Retail	Sports	Stand-Alone	
NHL 2K7	Nov 13, 2006	Traditional Retail	Sports	Stand-Alone	
Ridge Racer 7	Nov 13, 2006	Traditional Retail	Racing	Stand-Alone	
Untold Legends: Dark Kingdom	Nov 13, 2006	Traditional Retail	Action, RPG	Stand-Alone	
Mobile Suit Gundam: Crossfire	Nov 13, 2006	Traditional Retail	Action-Adventure, Shooter	Stand-Alone	
NBA 07	Nov 14, 2006	Traditional Retail	Sports	Stand-Alone	
Tiger Woods PGA Tour 07	Nov 14, 2006	Traditional Retail	Sports	Stand-Alone	
Call of Duty 3	Nov 14, 2006	Traditional Retail	Shooter	Stand-Alone (Note: Xbox 360 Version Featured DLC)	
Genji: Days of the Blade	Nov 14, 2006	Traditional Retail	Action, RPG	Stand-Alone	
Resistance: Fall of Man	Nov 14, 2006	Traditional Retail	Shooter	DLC (Jan 2007, Jun 2007)	2 Add-On Map Packs (2 Free)
Madden NFL 07	Nov 14, 2006	Traditional Retail	Sports	Stand-Alone (Note: Xbox 360 Version Featured DLC)	
Need for Speed Carbon	Nov 16, 2006	Traditional Retail	Sports	Stand-Alone	
Cash Guns Chaos	Nov 17, 2006	Digital Only	Arcade Shooter	Stand-Alone	
Blast Factor	Nov 17, 2006	Digital Only	Arcade Shooter	DLC (Feb 2007-Aug 2007)	(Note: Information Currently Unavailable)
Tony Hawk's Project 8	Nov 17, 2006	Traditional Retail	Sports	Stand-Alone	
Marvel: Ultimate Alliance	Nov 17, 2006	Traditional Retail	Action	Stand-Alone (Note: Xbox 360 Version Featured DLC)	

Fight Night Round 3	Dec 5, 2006	Traditional Retail	Sports	Stand-Alone	
Go! Sudoku	Dec 7, 2006	Digital Only	Puzzle	Stand-Alone	
Lemmings	Dec 7, 2006	Digital Only	Puzzle	Stand-Alone	
Full Auto 2: Battlelines	Dec 7, 2006	Traditional Retail	Racing, Shooter	Stand-Alone	
Blazing Angels: Squadrons of WWII	Dec 12, 2006	Traditional Retail	Action, Flight Simulator	Stand-Alone	
Gran Turismo HD Concept	Dec 24, 2006	Digital Only	Racing	Stand-Alone	

PlayStation – Year 3

PlayStation 3 Game	Release Date	Traditional Retail or Digital Only	Genre	DLC or Stand-Alone	DLC Details (If Applicable)
GripShift	Jan 4, 2007	Digital Only	Racing	Stand-Alone (Note: Xbox 360 Version Featured DLC)	
Sonic the Hedgehog	Jan 30, 2007	Traditional Retail	Platformer	Stand-Alone	
Virtua Fighter 5	Feb 20, 2007	Traditional Retail	Fighter	Stand-Alone	
Q*bert	Feb 22, 2007	Digital Only	Action, Puzzle	Stand-Alone	
flOw	Feb 22, 2007	Digital Only	Abstract, Action	DLC (Nov 2007)	1 Expansion Pack with New Playable Creature, Vibration Support, Screen Shot Functionality (1 Priced)
Major League Baseball 2K7	Feb 26, 2007	Traditional Retail	Sports	Stand-Alone	
Formula One Championship Edition	Feb 27, 2007	Traditional Retail	Racing	Stand-Alone	
Tekken 5: Dark Resurrection	Mar 1, 2007	Digital Only	Fighter	Stand-Alone	
NBA Street Homecourt	Mar 6, 2007	Traditional Retail	Sports	Stand-Alone (Note: Xbox 360 Version Featured DLC)	
Def Jam: Icon	Mar 6, 2007	Traditional Retail	Fighting, Music, Rhythm	Stand-Alone	
MotorStorm	Mar 6, 2007	Traditional Retail	Racing	DLC (Jun 2007, Sep 2007)	2 Expansion Packs with New Music Tracks, New Race Tracks, New Vehicles, New Time Attack Mode (1 Free, 1 Priced)
College Hoops 2K7	Mar 13, 2007	Traditional Retail	Sports	Stand-Alone (Note: Xbox 360 Version Featured DLC)	
The Godfather: The Don's Edition	Mar 20, 2007	Traditional Retail	Action, Sandbox	DLC (Expansion	

				Pack Included on Re-Release)	
The Elder Scrolls IV: Oblivion	Mar 20, 2007	Traditional Retail	RPG	DLC	
Virtua Tennis 3	Mar 20, 2007	Traditional Retail	Sports	Stand-Alone	
Armored Core 4	Mar 20, 2007	Traditional Retail	Shooter	Stand-Alone	
Tom Clancy's Splinter Cell Double Agent	Mar 30, 2007	Traditional Retail	Shooter	Stand-Alone (Note: Xbox 360 Version Featured DLC)	
Enchanted Arms	Apr 3, 2007	Traditional Retail	RPG	Stand-Alone	
Mortal Kombat II	Apr 12, 2007	Digital Only	Fighter	Stand-Alone	
F.E.A.R.	Apr 24, 2007	Traditional Retail	Shooter	Stand-Alone	
Super Rub a Dub	May 2, 2007	Digital Only	Puzzle	Stand-Alone	
Guantlet II	May 3, 2007	Digital Only	Dungeon Crawler, Brawler	Stand-Alone	
Spider-Man 3	May 4, 2007	Traditional Retail	Action, Sandbox	DLC (May 2007)	1 Add-On New Playable Character (1 Priced)
Rampart	May 10, 2007	Digital Only	Action, Strategy	Stand-Alone	
Calling All Cars!	May 10, 2007	Digital Only	Racing	Stand-Alone	
MLB 07: The Show	May 15, 2007	Traditional Retail	Sports	Stand-Alone	
Rampage World Tour	May 17, 2007	Digital Only	Action	Stand-Alone	
Pirates of the Caribbean: At World's End	May 22, 2007	Traditional Retail	Action- Adventure	Stand-Alone	
Joust	May 24, 2007	Digital Only	Action	Stand-Alone	
Surf's Up	May 30, 2007	Traditional Retail	Sports	Stand-Alone	
Championship Sprint	May 31, 2007	Digital Only	Sports	Stand-Alone	
Go! Puzzle	Jun 14, 2007	Digital Only	Puzzle	Stand-Alone	

Fantastic Four: Rise of the Silver Surfer	Jun 15, 2007	Traditional Retail	Action-Adventure	Stand-Alone	
Harry Potter and the Order of the Phoenix	Jun 25, 2007	Traditional Retail	Action-Adventure	Stand-Alone	
The Bigs	Jun 25, 2007	Traditional Retail	Sports	Stand-Alone	
The Darkness	Jun 25, 2007	Traditional Retail	Action, Shooter	Stand-Alone	
Tom Clancy's Rainbow Six Vegas	Jun 26, 2007	Traditional Retail	Shooter	Stand-Alone (Note: Xbox 360 Version Featured DLC)	
Transformers: The Game	Jun 26, 2007	Traditional Retail	Action	Stand-Alone (Note: Xbox 360 Version Featured DLC)	
Super Stardust HD	Jun 28, 2007	Digital Only	Top-Down Shooter	DLC (April 2008, July 2008, April 2011)	3 Add-Ons with New Modes, Split Screen Functionality, New Music Tracks (3 Priced)
Ninja Gaiden Sigma	Jul 3, 2007	Traditional Retail	Action	Stand-Alone	
All-Pro Football 2K8	Jul 16, 2007	Traditional Retail	Sports	DLC (July 2007)	1 Add-On 2K Reelmaker (1 Priced)
NCAA Football 08	Jul 17, 2007	Traditional Retail	Sports	Stand-Alone	
Nascar 08	Jul 23, 2007	Traditional Retail	Sports	Stand-Alone	
Nucleus	Jul 31, 2007	Digital Only	Shooter	Stand-Alone	
Piyotama	Aug 9, 2007	Digital Only	Puzzle	DLC (Oct 2007)	1 Add-On Halloween Skin (1 Free)
Madden NFL 08	Aug 14, 2007	Traditional Retail	Sports	Stand-Alone	
Tom Clancy's Ghost Recon Advanced Warfighter 2	Aug 23, 2007	Traditional Retail	Shooter	Stand-Alone (Note: Xbox 360 Version Featured DLC)	
Tiger Woods PGA Tour 08	Aug 28, 2007	Traditional Retail	Sports	Stand-Alone	
Dynasty Warriors: Gundam	Aug 28, 2007	Traditional Retail	Action, Brawler	Stand-Alone	

Warhawk	Aug 28, 2007	Digital Only	Action, Shooter	Stand-Alone	
Super Puzzle Fighter II Turbo HD Remix	Aug 30, 2007	Digital Only	Fighter	Stand-Alone	
Lair	Aug 30, 2007	Traditional Retail	Action, Shooter, Flight Simulator	Stand-Alone	
NHL 2K8	Sep 10, 2007	Traditional Retail	Sports	Stand-Alone (Note: Xbox 360 Version Featured DLC)	
NHL 08	Sep 11, 2007	Traditional Retail	Sports	Stand-Alone	
DiRT	Sep 11, 2007	Traditional Retail	Racing	Stand-Alone	
Heavenly Sword	Sep 12, 2007	Traditional Retail	Action	Stand-Alone	
PixelJunk Racers	Sep 13, 2007	Digital Only	Racing	Stand-Alone	
High Stakes on the Vegas Strip: Poker Edition	Sep 13, 2007	Digital Only	Sports	Stand-Alone	
Stuntman: Ignition	Sep 17, 2007	Traditional Retail	Racing	Stand-Alone (Note: Xbox 360 Version Featured DLC)	
LocoRoco Cocoreccho!	Sep 20, 2007	Digital Only	Platformer	Stand-Alone	
Skate	Sep 24, 2007	Traditional Retail	Sports	Stand-Alone	
World Series of Poker 2008: Battle for the Bracelets	Sep 25, 2007	Traditional Retail	Sports	Stand-Alone	
NBA Live 08	Oct 1, 2007	Traditional Retail	Sports	Stand-Alone	
NBA 2K8	Oct 2, 2007	Traditional Retail	Sports	Stand-Alone	
Go! Sports Ski	Oct 4, 2007	Digital Only	Sports	Stand-Alone	
FIFA Soccer 08	Oct 9, 2007	Traditional Retail	Sports	Stand-Alone	
Sega Rally Revo	Oct 9, 2007	Traditional Retail	Racing	Stand-Alone	

Folklore	Oct 9, 2007	Traditional Retail	Action, RPG	DLC (Oct 2007, Nov 2007, Dec 2007, Jan 2008, Feb 2008)	9 Add-Ons with New Characters, New Equipment (3 Free, 6 Priced)
Everyday Shooter	Oct 11, 2007	Digital Only	Arcade Shooter	Stand-Alone	
NBA 08	Oct 12, 2007	Traditional Retail	Sports	Stand-Alone	
Tony Hawk's Proving Ground	Oct 15, 2007	Traditional Retail	Sports	Stand-Alone	
Juiced 2: Hot Import Nights	Oct 22, 2007	Traditional Retail	Racing	Stand-Alone	
Conan	Oct 23, 2007	Traditional Retail	Action	Stand-Alone	
Ratatouille	Oct 23, 2007	Traditional Retail	Action-Adventure, Platformer	Stand-Alone	
Clive Barker's Jericho	Oct 23, 2007	Traditional Retail	Shooter	Stand-Alone	
Ratchet & Clank Future: Tools of Destruction	Oct 23, 2007	Traditional Retail	Action, Shooter, Platformer	Stand-Alone	
The Eye of Judgment	Oct 24, 2007	Traditional Retail	Strategy, Card Game	Stand-Alone	
Guitar Hero III: Legends of Rock	Oct 28, 2007	Traditional Retail	Music, Rhythm Game	DLC (Consistent Releases Between Nov 2007-April 2014)	23 Add-On Music Track Packs (5 Free, 18 Priced) [Note: 9 Additional Individual Music Tracks Released]
John Woo Presents Stranglehold	Oct 29, 2007	Traditional Retail	Shooter	DLC (Jan 2008)	1 Add-On Map Pack (1 Priced)
The Simpsons Game	Oct 30, 2007	Traditional Retail	Platformer, Action-Adventure	Stand-Alone	
Cars Mater-National Championship	Oct 30, 2007	Traditional Retail	Racing	Stand-Alone	
Call of Duty 4: Modern Warfare	Nov 5, 2007	Traditional Retail	Shooter	DLC (Apr 2008)	1 Add-On Map Pack (1 Priced)
LEGO Star Wars: The Complete Saga	Nov 6, 2007	Traditional Retail	Action-Adventure	Stand-Alone	

Blazing Angels 2: Secret Missions of WWII	Nov 6, 2007	Traditional Retail	Action, Flight Simulator	Stand-Alone	
Bladestorm: The Hundred Years' War	Nov 6, 2007	Traditional Retail	Action, Strategy, RPG	Stand-Alone	
Beowulf: The Game	Nov 13, 2007	Traditional Retail	Action-Adventure	Stand-Alone	
Need for Speed ProStreet	Nov 13, 2007	Traditional Retail	Racing	Stand-Alone	
Kane & Lynch: Dead Men	Nov 13, 2007	Traditional Retail	Action, Shooter	Stand-Alone (Note: Xbox 360 Version Featured DLC)	
WWE Smackdown vs. Raw 2008	Nov 13, 2007	Traditional Retail	Fighter	Stand-Alone (Note: Xbox 360 Version Featured DLC)	
Assassin's Creed	Nov 13, 2007	Traditional Retail	Action-Adventure	Stand-Alone	
Uncharted: Drake's Fortune	Nov 16, 2007	Traditional Retail	Action-Adventure, Shooter	Stand-Alone	
Soldier of Fortune: Payback	Nov 19, 2007	Traditional Retail	Shooter	Stand-Alone	
College Hoops 2K8	Nov 19, 2007	Traditional Retail	Sports	Stand-Alone (Note: Xbox 360 Version Featured DLC)	
TimeShift	Nov 19, 2007	Traditional Retail	Shooter	Stand-Alone (Note: Xbox 360 Version Featured DLC)	
Medal of Honor: Airborne	Nov 19, 2007	Traditional Retail	Shooter	Stand-Alone	
Operation Creature Feature	Nov 20, 2007	Digital Only	Puzzle	Stand-Alone	
Aquatopia	Nov 20, 2007	Digital Only	Simulation	Stand-Alone	
Rock Band	Nov 20, 2007	Traditional Retail	Music, Rhythm	DLC (Consistent Releases Between Jun 2008-Mar 2017)	[Note: Both Expansion Music Track Packs and Individual Songs Number Well into the Hundreds. Majority of Material Priced.]

Time Crisis 4	Nov 20, 2007	Traditional Retail	Shooter	Stand-Alone	
PAIN	Nov 29, 2007	Digital Only	Action, Misc	DLC (Consistent Releases Between Nov 2007-Nov 2010)	51 Add-Ons with New Modes, New Characters, New Settings (5 Free, 46 Priced)
The Golden Compass	Dec 4, 2007	Traditional Retail	Action-Adventure	Stand-Alone	
High Velocity Bowling	Dec 6, 2007	Digital Only	Sports	DLC (Consistent Releases Between Dec 2007-Oct 2010)	34 Add-Ons with New Bowling Balls, New Characters (8 Free, 26 Priced)
BlackSite: Area 51	Dec 10, 2007	Traditional Retail	Shooter	Stand-Alone	
NCAA March Madness 08	Dec 11, 2007	Traditional Retail	Sports	Stand-Alone	
The Orange Box	Dec 11, 2007	Traditional Retail	Shooter, Puzzle	Stand-Alone	
Unreal Tournament III	Dec 11, 2007	Traditional Retail	Shooter	DLC (Mar 2009)	
MX vs. ATV Untamed	Dec 17, 2007	Traditional Retail	Racing	Stand-Alone	
Mesmerize: Distort	Dec 20, 2007	Digital Only	Abstract	Stand-Alone	
The Trials of Topoq	Dec 20, 2007	Digital Only	Puzzle	Stand-Alone	
Toy Home	Dec 20, 2007	Digital Only	Driving, Racing	DLC (Mar 2008)	1 Expansion Pack (1 Priced)
Snakeball	Dec 20, 2007	Digital Only	Action, Puzzle	Stand-Alone	

Note on Research Methods for DLC Releases

With both the Xbox 360 and PlayStation 3 DLC research, I first studied the console's own built-in marketplace to see where these expansions were listed for the first three years of DLC's incorporated use. However, it's worth pointing out that while the console marketplaces provide an excellent starting place for this research, their information can be incomplete based on a couple issues. First, the console marketplaces tend not to give clear information on release dates for either titles or their DLC add-ons. Second, if the DLC or the game itself has been delisted from the console's platform, there is no information available as to what was once provided by the console's store. With these issues in mind, I supplemented my research on the console platforms with online research. I used the *Metacritic* 'Legacy Systems' archive on releases and reviews to get details on release information for the five years of my console DLC case study. I also used the extensive database on the online game publication *Giant Bomb* to cross-check and fill in information on DLC releases. Finally, where possible I used extensive searches through older game publications like *IGN* and *Game Developer* (rebranded from *Gamasutra*) to corroborate the information I was finding from these two main sources.

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