

EXTENDED OR EXHAUSTED – THE PRODUCTION,
FORM, AND RECEPTION OF DOWNLOADABLE
CONTENT IN SKATE 3

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The introduction of online connectivity and a hard drive has changed how console games can be marketed and sold, as it is now possible to patch, update, and publish more content after the game is released. *Downloadable add-on content* (DLC) is the latest, and still evolving, formatting strategy in the long line of entertainment industry franchising practices. A digital attachment to the physical game copy, DLC is used to guide players to networked service relationships and to uphold these services, while prolonging players' time with the game through offering more content. Because of its smaller size, DLC is quickly developed and can be used to mitigate financial risk, to bridge the gaps between bigger franchise installments, and to better answer the needs of the fragmented niche markets.

In this thesis the benefits and ramifications of DLC, both for the gaming industry and to the player community, are examined. I ask how DLC, as a marketing practice, affects the play and the surrounding culture of console games. More specifically, in what ways does the DLC model affect the ways console games are marketed, and, in what ways does the player community respond to these marketing strategies? The thesis approaches the DLC model through a case study of the skateboarding game *Skate 3*. The methodological approach consists of a three-fold media industry analysis focusing on 1) cultural production and political economy analysis, 2) cultural texts, and 3) the reception and effects of those texts. These layers are then used as lenses to dissect the respective areas of the DLC model utilized in the case game *Skate 3*. Tying into each other in surprising depth, the production, distribution, and the textual form of DLC are examined through critical political economy analysis, whereas the player reception is opened by secondary data analysis of user discussions on the gaming forum NeoGAF and on the official *Skate* blog.

Visible within the DLC system is the fact how marketing imperatives have shaped the form of the digital game to better answer their needs. Through leveraging the fragmented form of DLC, options open for controlling both the competition and the player population. As games can be used again after consumption, it is in the interests of the gaming companies to artificially limit this second-hand access to them. DLC provides a solution to this, as it is bound to the first buyer and cannot be sold forward. To get the "full experience", second-hand users, too, must pay. Thus DLC can be used for exploiting the power its production structure has over individual. Players are enticed to buy more expensive new game copies, coaxed into service relationships, and leveraged towards other franchises. A central method is to utilize DLC's fragmented form and use DLC packs for rewarding players when they conform to the marketing plan.

The ramifications of the new digital economy come as a surprise to many users. DLC divides the play experience into several pieces, denying the player the "whole experience" unless she buys all the DLC packs. Player groups are forced to buy the same DLC packs to play the same content. As many users still do not have the ability to play or pay online, the online components create haves and have-nots. Players are also forced to

gather information about the model on the Internet and left to wonder whether or not DLC even works in certain situations. For many players DLC spoils the customer experience by accruing additional costs over time, making players feel they are charged for content they have already paid for, and by selling a service that simply ceases to function over time. The publisher Electronic Arts contradicts itself by, on the one hand giving an implied promise of a service relationship and basing *Skate 3* forcefully on online components, and on the other hand letting its game servers and customer support deteriorate, abruptly disbanding its game service once it ceases to be profitable.

Keywords: Console Games, Game Industry, Digital Distribution, Downloadable Add-on Content, Player Studies

Preface

Writing this thesis has been first and foremost a learning experience. Most of this learning, then, happens in the end, when the pieces are in place and suddenly there is a whole. No doubt there are things I would do otherwise if I were to do it all again. Having said that, I am very proud of the improvement I made during this research process.

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Heikki Tyni

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1 INTRODUCTION

Pinned in the cross pressure of smart phone gaming and free-to-play games, the blockbuster console game is in crisis. As the largest game productions nowadays cost up to tens of millions of euros, fewer and fewer game companies have the capability or the willingness to compete in the market sector. The biggest publishers focus their publishing efforts on a few hit franchises, cancelling projects and cutting down costs elsewhere. Following this, the industry has turned to smaller, low-risk game projects for help. Instead of a high-cost sequel or a high-risk new intellectual property, publishers go increasingly often for smaller, downloadable console games or choose to extend their existing games with *downloadable add-on content* (DLC) distributed through proprietary online stores. Via DLC console gamers can be sold additional story content, avatars, equipment, and game modes, to name just a few examples. During the last couple of years, the games industry has found DLC to be useful for various things: to mitigate financial risk, to bridge the gaps between bigger franchise installments, and to better answer the needs of the fragmented niche markets.

In this thesis I attempt to examine what kind of benefits and ramifications DLC has both for the gaming industry and to the player community. **I ask how DLC, as a marketing practice, affects the play and the surrounding culture of console games.** This research question entails a couple of sub questions. **First, in what ways does the DLC model affect the ways console games are marketed? Second, in what ways does the player community respond to these marketing strategies?** Based on this, **I also ask whether the marketing of console games contradicts itself by incorporating too many franchising practices.** To quote Raymond Williams, my aim is to engage a “particular cultural technology, and to look at its development, its institutions, its forms and its effects, in this critical dimension” (in Kline et al. 2003, 49). Following the two central viewpoints, the study has two central research perspectives: that of the game industry and that of the players. As many scholars note, it is important to study the production and consumption of media together (Meehan, 2000; Kellner, 2009; Sotamaa, 2009). Thus both perspectives are given methodological room: while game industry is read from the perspective of political economy, the views of the player community are explored through secondary data analysis and online ethnography.

The skateboarding game *Skate 3* (2010; PS3, Xbox 360) serves as a case study, illustrating the ways DLC is used to exploit franchises, build service relationships with the gamers, and guide their consumption habits. The corporate ideology behind DLC is examined by close reading the game and the associated DLC packs and outlining some of the major strategies DLC is used for. Furthermore, I seek to tease out the ways in which players are incorporated into the networks of production and consumption. Accordingly, the aim here is to “trace processes by which corporations routinize, commercialize, and commoditize both cultural expression and cultural consumption” (Meehan, 2000), and to uncover whether there exists an “illusion of choice” in the DLC system, typical for new media (Palmer, 2003). In order to gain an understanding of the consequences the DLC model has on gaming culture, the forum discussions are analyzed to highlight the divergent opinions on *Skate 3* DLC within the active player base. In the end I suggest that the DLC model aims to build sales based on service rhetoric and build a foundation for an eco-system based on digitally distributed software, but, to a degree, fails to deliver on its implied promises and to respond to the player needs in a meaningful way.

The study concentrates on console games, as they offer both a more closed and controlled environment for game companies to operate in and also a more easily demarcated research area. For many years console games have also been economically the largest gaming sector. During the last couple of years the pressure from the neighboring sectors, smart phone gaming and free-to-play games, has provoked the console industry to aggressively respond in unconventional ways. These new, controversial methods have subsequently offered the academia fertile ground for critical analysis over industry practices. Published by the industry giant Electronic Arts (EA), *Skate 3* is a good example of robust serialization, tying the game horizontally, vertically, and diagonally to the surrounding franchise. In many ways gaming is the first media market to shift successfully toward a service-driven model (Chang, 2010; Sotamaa & Karppi, 2010). While many traditional media companies have found themselves in trouble with digital distribution and free content, game developers and publishers have been quick to come up with efficient strategies in active dialogue with their players. In this respect, this thesis should be of interest to anyone who wishes to understand the current transition in distribution and consumption of digital content.

This thesis is partly based on a case study, *How downloadable content keeps the player on the rail* (Tyni, 2011), published in *New paradigms for digital games: The Finnish*

perspective (Sotamaa et al. 2011), which was the final report for Future Play project conducted in the University of Tampere Game Research Lab during 2009-2011. The case study was later developed into a conference paper, *Extended or exhausted: How console DLC keeps the player on the rail* (Tyni & Sotamaa, 2011), by myself and Olli Sotamaa. The arguments presented in that paper are expanded and developed forward in this thesis, especially on the parts of the player reception and all of the concluding chapters. While the conference paper was mostly based on the case study I wrote, Olli Sotamaa was responsible for tying the study more tightly into related research, as well as strengthening the methodological background of the paper – something he continued to do as the primary supervisor of this thesis.

1.1 Downloadable content

Few academic studies so far have examined the particularities of downloadable content (DLC) as such. Nieborg (2006) makes a valuable contribution by critically evaluating PC expansion packs – a precursor to DLC – as a dominating game industry serialization practice. A few studies look to other add-on content such as mods (Sotamaa 2009; Postigo, 2007) and user-generated content (Sotamaa, 2010), while a lot of research concentrates on the current economy circling around downloadable games (not add-on content) and digital distribution.

Taken literally, downloadable content can be used to point to any kind of digital gaming content available for downloading through various online stores and virtual marketplaces. However, in the popular language of gaming sites, magazines, and market research companies the acronym DLC has been largely appropriated as the definition for commercially released *add-on* content for digital games, distributed through the Internet. DLC can be distributed free-of-charge or for a fee. It can be any kind of content of various sizes, such as additional characters, stages, quests, or game modes for a complete and already released game.

DLC is not generally used to refer to entire downloadable games. Overwhelmingly entire downloadable games are referred to as downloadable ‘titles’ or ‘games’, as opposed to ‘content’. Every now and then there are instances where this usage of the term DLC is challenged, but these are few and far between. As the problematics of downloadable *add-on content* differ from those of entire downloadable *games*, it is useful to examine

the economic and cultural structures of these areas separately – indeed this is one of the key motivations for this study. Thus, in this thesis the term ‘downloadable content’ and its acronym DLC are used exclusively to point to *downloadable add-on content* only. Should any overlapping happen with other areas of downloadable goods, it is pointed out.

I should also point out that in this thesis I will concentrate on add-on content available to console games, not PC add-on content. Historically PC has been open for modifications, and there are certainly no technical limitations selling ‘console style’ DLC for home computers. In fact, due to streamlined hardware and interfaces, recent years have seen PC evolve into a more console-like plug’n’play gaming device. Digital marketplaces such as Steam not only sell games, but also act as platforms for play, simplifying the play experience associated with PC gaming. A more closed and tightly controlled environment like Steam supports well console-like DLC packs, and most modern games released on both PC and consoles receive the same DLC on both platforms. Still, for the purposes of narrowing down research focus, and because of the possibly ambiguous proximity of PC DLC to PC mods, only console DLC is examined in this thesis.

Finally, perhaps the most ambiguous distinction to make is that between DLC and *virtual goods*. Virtual goods are various virtual items sold (and sometimes given out for free) in various online games but especially in free-to-play games played on social networks where the social context plays an important part. Various studies have been conducted on virtual goods especially from the perspective of marketing (Lehdonvirta 2009a; 2009b; Hamari & Lehdonvirta, 2010). In short, free-to-play games aim to create a context in which virtual goods become both meaningful and enticing for the player-customer (Hamari & Lehdonvirta, 2010; Tyni et al., 2011). For a free-to-play game, this *ad hoc* marketing context becomes as central as the playability of the game. Instead of any functional add-ons that might for example expand the game, players are sold decorative items for identity building and social differentiation. This concentration on virtual decorations has provoked critique of virtual goods being seemingly “useless” (Lehdonvirta, 2009a).

Broadly speaking, DLC could also be referred to as virtual goods. To some extent DLC also relies on creating an enticing context – you can sell (merely) decorative items in a paid console game too, assuming building and showcasing an identity is an important

part of that game. However, the central logic behind the two business models differs from each other: as console games are paid upfront, they do not rely on sustained and prolonged sales of virtual content. While the marketing context of the DLC model rests in surrounding the game with a service, free-to-play games not only do this, but additionally turn the actual game itself into a marketing context. Make no mistake, the two areas are closely related, but again, benefit from separate examinations.

1.2 Other add-on content

Digital games are one of the best examples for critiquing determinist thinking where new technologies are created only by inventors and professionals. On the contrary, many of the best ideas are hatched by players, who – often unintentionally – have established the foundation for subsequent large scale, commercial development (Kline et al., 2003, 56). Game mods, short for modifications, are fan-programmed add-ons to commercial games, shared free on the Internet. Game companies benefit from modding, as mods extend the life of a game, sometimes by several years (Nieborg, 2006; Postigo 2007). Modding acts as a mechanism for game industry where sizeable player communities spread around the world tweak games into wanted directions, innovating by iterating. Sometimes modding activities even lead to game companies hiring the talent behind successful mods.

On the other hand, mods can be sometimes seen as an unlicensed usage of the game by the players and thus condemnable. Research has also highlighted instances where a game company has hired a team behind a successful mod and promptly fired them, keeping only IP rights to the mod (Nieborg, 2006).

Different from mods, user-generated content (UGC) is content created by players in a game editor supplied with the game by the developer. On PC side the line between UGC and mods is no doubt many times hard to define; for many players the difference might be in whether or not the editor is endorsed by the developer, whereas PC developers might prefer to mix the two acronyms at will. On the other hand, since console players are almost never able to drastically modify their games, UGC is a more fitting term to describe games such as *LittleBigPlanet* (2008) that strongly accentuate on player creations within the borders set by the game developer. Console games are rarely modified, since utilizing console mods is significantly more laborious and the console

online environment is usually tightly controlled by the developer, forbidding any kinds of changes in the game code.

1.3 Franchising: the origin of DLC

In order to fully understand the past and the future of DLC, one needs to take into account the particular position of digital games in the crossroads of cultural industries and software development. In her analysis of contemporary games industry, Aphra Kerr (2006) finds a number of similarities between digital games and more traditional cultural industries. In short, games are a high-risk industry with high production costs and low reproduction costs (cf. Hesmondhalgh, 2002, 18-21). Strategies like vertical and horizontal integration are actively used to control costs and to guarantee access to a wide set of distribution channels.

Much of large-scale game development depends on uncontrollable trends and user taste. Thus, the largest game companies have to strongly focus on creating sustainability to their business (Kerr 2006, Nieborg 2006). One of the central methods the game companies use to shape more predictable audiences is to utilize serialization and franchising. Audiences respond more favorably to properties they already know, titles that have already been “pre-sold” to them through other media forms (Schatz, 1993). In succession, blockbuster titles often act as advertisement epicenters for large product lines revolving around them (ibid., 32).

As a marketing practice, the roots of commercial DLC can be found in franchising. Franchising has been a norm in the entertainment industries for decades. The star system, the movie genre, and film serialization were all welcomed and subsequently supported by the film studios, as it was discovered they could be used to create lasting interest among fans and continuity beyond a single movie (Hesmondhalgh, 2002). While nowadays a dominant franchising strategy in the game business, serialization was not needed in the time of the first digital games, as no endings were created for them. Many of the early arcade games, for example, simply seized working after reaching the last stage in their memory. Towards the end of the 1970s, as digital games became slowly commoditized, the use of a game story was adopted to justify sequels and the continuation of the game series (Stenros & Sotamaa, 2009; Kücklich, 2011).

Throughout the 1980s and the 1990s, the game industry discovered new ways to exploit serialization. Particular to the digital game industry, the code of the game could be re-used by creating new content on top of the existing game engine – a possibility harnessed by game fans through the use of game modifications. Modifications, or mods, were created and shared by fans, for free, through the Internet. Many game developers soon discovered how the players were extending their games and started to offer also commercial expansion packs. Limited to the PC gaming culture, these add-on packages came in many shapes and sizes, and were distributed both through physical and digital distribution channels. Due to their small size and subsequently faster development cycle, expansion packs made serializing games an increasingly fast-paced affair. Significantly, the expansion pack allowed the game industry to start exhausting intellectual properties through as many franchise installments as possible (Nieborg, 2006). This practice of “branched serialization” (ibid.) can be seen as the starting point for the modern DLC strategies.

Besides serialization, a few other game industry trends have paved the way for the emergence of DLC. Coming into the present day, the latest console generation has standardized the online connection and the hard drive, thus enabling digital distribution of additional gaming content also for consoles. Compared to traditional cultural industries, digital games suit perfectly for online distribution. Like any piece of software, digital games exist from the beginning in digital form. (Jöckel et al., 2008) At the same time, investing money on virtual commodities has become increasingly common (Lehdonvirta, 2009b). In addition, the play habits of modern gamers are getting more casual, and subsequently bite-sized games played on a browser and on smart phones are becoming increasingly popular (Juul, 2009). Unlike in the earlier “economics of scale” (stocking large amounts of wares due to low margins), it has now become profitable to develop and publish game content that costs only around 1-10€. Designing smaller games and add-on content has had many benefits: due to small investment, companies can take more risks and try out things, and the game content can be both attuned to wider spectrum of demographics and be better personalized for individual players.

DLC can also be seen connecting to an emerging dominance of bite-sized gaming content. During the last couple of years, small applications, apps, have risen to the side of the blockbuster console game as a major industry phenomenon, representing a curious

divide of game content into two separate forms, extra-large and extra-small. In DLC, game industry has combined the two, as the largest blockbuster games utilize small-size DLC packs in various ways to grow even bigger.

While apps have become a significant economic force in the entertainment software sector, DLC sales have increased too. Although there are no comprehensive sales numbers available for DLC sales in Finland or in Europe, a 2011 survey study by the research firm Electronic Entertainment Design and Research (EEDAR) reveals that 51% of the all North American HD console owners (PS3, Xbox 360) have bought DLC (EEDAR, 2011). For game developers, a relevant question regarding DLC sales is how high the attach rate between main game and DLC is. Again, while there are no solid numbers, according to Remedy CEO Matias Myllyrinne around 20% of the players who played the popular console game *Alan Wake* (2010) bought also the associated DLC packs, a number Myllyrinne saw as a good result (Myllyrinne, 2010). The attach rates are a suspect to grow, too, as EEDAR estimates that in 2012 DLC market will generate a revenue of over 1\$ billion in North America and over 2\$ billion worldwide (EEDAR, 2011).

1.4 From franchising to game-services

Game design on most platforms can now take for granted the possibility of patching, updating, and changing games when needed. This is also increasingly often expected by the audience, as the most celebrated applications seem to be those which constantly improve the experience they are offering with a stream of new content. According to Stenros and Sotamaa (2009), “business-wise the objective behind the flow of upgrades and add-ons is not only to create some additional revenue but perhaps even more importantly to create a long-term service relationship with the customer”. Moving away from single expansion packs towards distribution of content how and where ever, it is this service mentality that seems to be the next logical step in the evolution of franchising and serialization, especially in the case of DLC.

Online connectivity and hard drive acting as a basis, console games are designed to be more service-like by concentrating on components such as online-multiplayer and different methods of creating and sharing content. Poignant examples of these principles

are user-generated-content games like *LittleBigPlanet*. In it, players can play cooperatively online, visit stages created by each other, and buy additional creation tools. Here a transition towards free-to-play games can also be seen, as the bulk of the virtual items on sale are merely decorative avatar outfits.

The evolution of add-on content from expansion packs to DLC has meant both that the size of the patches has become smaller and that they are released increasingly often. Even though they are paid up front, there are more and more console games that depend heavily on content sold through micro transactions – in the popular *Guitar Hero* series (2005-2010), for example, players are able to download single songs out of thousands on offer. Considering these trajectories, it seems that not only are the DLC and free-to-play models closely related to each other, but they could also be seen as different phases in a larger transformation of the digital game into a game-as-a-service.

Describing the evolution of marketing, Garnham notes how the media industries themselves have become businesses striving to deliver media products faster and faster to consumers in order to minimize any downtime in the circulation of capital (including helping consumers consume faster) (1990, 46-47). Basically, this has meant innovating and supporting new technologies capable of faster and less obtrusive media delivery. Accordingly, game industry has become increasingly good at filling any free space with game content, or as Nieborg (2006) puts it, completely exhausting franchises. In this evolution one logical branch has been the introduction of the free-to-play game, a persistent service with thousands of available micro transactions.

Indeed, during the last couple of years the free-to-play model has become a major economic force and service model in the game industry. However, as game industry is so sensitive to shifts in trends and user taste, no model is ever perfect and different models give birth to new combinations (for example the subscription model of MMOs is now introduced to console games). This is one of the reasons why a model such as DLC is relatively hard to give a solid definition. It is also the reason why the DLC model continues to be relevant even when seemingly swallowed by more recent business models. I will further elaborate the topic of game service in the Chapter 4.3. I also return to the issue in the conclusion chapter of this thesis.

2 METHODOLOGY

Focusing on the ways DLC is used and received, this study is first concerned with the development, distribution, and marketing of console games. On the other hand it tries to find how the fan community is affected by the new medium and how they deal with the media change in their cultural sphere. While political economy of media and audience studies have traditionally been separated from each other, the accelerated circulation of digital content has forced scholars to seek ways of bringing these approaches together (Hartley, 2008). It has been suggested, that it is especially in the field of game studies that the productive use of critical political economy can bring new perspectives to the contemporary cultural inquiry (Nieborg & Hermes, 2008). Contemporary digital media in general and gaming in particular are importantly co-constructed by developers and users: while some ideas emerge from bottom up, others spread from top down. Thus, the focus needs to be turned to the push-pull dynamic between the industry and the players. (Consalvo, 2007; Jenkins, 2006; Sotamaa 2009).

In the following I will go over the methodological background leading to this study. I will first give a quick look on how different traditions of cultural and communications studies have shaped the study of the cultural industries and game industry as a part of them. I will then go on to describe how the different perspectives come together in a three-fold model formed by Douglas Kellner (2009), the analysis model used also in this thesis. I will return to the associated methodology in each analysis chapter; the study of production and texts in Chapter 4 and the study of reception in Chapter 5.

The history of cultural studies

Getting active during early 1930s, Frankfurt School first examined media, and especially mass-produced culture, as something used by governments to further their own ideology. They first came up with the term “cultural industry” to signify the process of commodification and massification of the produced culture. They felt that in order to understand and properly criticize the cultural industry we should analyze the ways its products are produced and distributed in each society. (Crawford & Rutter, 2006, 150-154)

Activating in early 1960s, British Cultural Studies – the Birmingham group – corrected Frankfurt School by rejecting their division of high (elitist) culture and low (mass produced and ideologically manipulative) culture and arguing that all culture and cultural artifacts had the same potential to 1) oppress and uphold the status quo, and on the other hand 2) to be a vehicle for resistance and contestation. Adopting Antonio Gramsci's model for hegemony/counter-hegemony, they strived to analyze the ruling "hegemony" and its weaknesses and to locate the openings for "counter-hegemony" (Crawford & Rutter, 2006, 152). Starting from their conception in early 1960s, British Cultural Studies regularly activated against injustice and oppression – which they saw to characterize the dominating hierarchical society – in the existing society. (Ibid. 152-154; Kellner, 2009, 98-99)

From fighting against racism, sexism, homophobia in the dominant culture and media, they spread their analysis to cover cultural artefacts, practices, and institutions in the existing networks of power (Kellner, 2009, 99). In the new commodified product culture, then, the hegemony and oppression could be seen "hiding" more and more in the products and the structures of consumerism. At the same time, the cultural industry produced more ways than ever to resist the hegemony of the dominant cultural industry (demonstrated for example by the counter-culture of punk in the 1970s and 1980s). The ideologies of Frankfurt School and the British Cultural Studies act as basis for the more modern political economy analysis.

Political economy analysis of digital games

Political economy is a branch of economics that is especially interested in the power relations within the industrial sector and how these relate to the individual (Kerr 2006, 4). Political economy is especially well suited for the critical analysis of the modern-day game industry. By being interactive by default and increasingly incorporating editing capabilities for designing custom scenarios, digital games seem to offer a perfect text for the "active" reader (Kline et al. 2003, 54). Yet, this seeming "power to refuse, subvert, or alter meanings implanted or intended by the artificer or author" proves often enough to be merely an invitation to set in motion and conform to the construction of a particular universe rather than a chance to modify or rewrite the structures of that universe (ibid., 54). Palmer describes how "the critical potential of 'active viewing' is considerably complicated by customisable media that anticipates variable ways of engaging

with its ‘services’” (2003, 161). That is to say, we have to be watchful for “the illusion of choice” (ibid.) the media corporations use in selling us new technologies (such as DLC).

It is here, that political economy stresses the heavy weight of the ubiquitous marketing machinery. Shaping future products by allowing user customization and collecting data from every user action in the networked environment; these seemingly democratizing acts of “corporate ‘responsiveness’” are revealed to be controlled by clearly defined marketing imperatives (Kline et al. 2003, 57). This becomes even more relevant in the completely constructed media landscape of digital games which more and more meld opportunities for transactions with the actual gameplay. For Meehan (2000), most media artifacts serve the commercial purpose of “cultivating” audiences; making us need and like specific goods and products. She describes how we cannot almost see this construction, this manufactured media landscape, anymore, as we are so indoctrinated on the idea that spending time with media and shopping are the most obvious acts of leisure (ibid.). Constructions like these, then, become the most essential targets for critical study.

One of the better critical analysis models is by Kline et al. (2003). In order to locate digital games within a larger landscape of “mediatized global marketplace”, they outline a “three-circuit model” for dividing the regime of digital games into “circuits” of *technology*, *culture*, and *marketing* from the viewpoint of political economy. These circuits are then used for more precisely dissecting different elements, such as actor roles, in each area. Besides these roles, the model helps to give a good comprehension of the pervasiveness of marketing in the contemporary games culture – a topic I will further elaborate in the Chapter 4.1.

Since political economy customarily sees audiences as something institutions and power structures construct and sell, it has been criticized for downplaying the role of the user who actually should be seen co-constructing the final cultural text (Kerr 2006, 5). Kerr reminds that users too shape products and inform their development in various ways not only before, but also after launch, as they come up with new and iterated implementations (Kerr, 2006, 6) such as mods. Kerr sees the technology in general is shaped by people within the wider context of social, cultural, economic, and political factors. Both people and technology have their places in the negotiated production process which

becomes understandable only when the wider contexts are acknowledged. (Ibid.) For Meehan (2000), combining the analysis of political economy with a combination of fan ethnographic approaches serves to balance optimism and pessimism: fan ethnographers study how fans appropriate and rework mediated ideology, whereas political economy helps to analyze the activities and structures that construct that mediated ideology and provide ways to locate fan cultures in the wider social and economic context.

In the face of this previous research, it comes obvious that the study of the game industry, as a significant sector of the larger cultural industry, demands a more holistic research approach, where production and consumption are studied together (Sotamaa, 2009). Cultural industries are a hegemonic force of the contemporary society, where facets of economical, technological, and political imperatives meet to create both opportunities and turbulence. They are also “complex, ambivalent, and contested”, as Hesmondhalgh (2002, 4) reminds, and thus we should not look for any simple answers in evaluating their power relations. Rather, technologies should be contextualized and judged case by case.

Method: the three-fold model

Douglas Kellner (2009) too has argued for a multi-perspective model in analyzing cultural industries. Specifically, Kellner seeks to combine social science based communications/media studies with the humanistic approach of cultural studies focusing on texts. For Kellner, the tradition of media analysis pioneered by the Frankfurt School and British Cultural studies importantly allow research to examine culture, media, and communications as a whole. He argues for a model combining the views of Frankfurt School, British Cultural Studies, and political economy to form a more comprehensive analysis model, seeking to overcome the limitations of only one field. (Ibid.) The methodological apparatus in this thesis follows Kellner (2009) in adopting a three-fold media industry analysis that combines the areas of: 1) cultural production and political economy analysis, 2) cultural texts, and 3) the reception and effects of those texts. In this thesis these layers act as lenses to dissect the respective areas of DLC thus providing a case analysis of a specific technology as suggested by Hesmondhalgh above.

First, the analysis of political economy provides a good view over the production and distribution of DLC. In the *production layer* I seek to contextualize DLC as a part of the wider game industry shift towards digital distribution and game-as-a-service thinking.

By analyzing the imperatives of distribution and marketing, as dictated by the economics of the digital game marketplace, we gain a valuable insight into the logic behind the production of DLC. The digital games marketplace is found to be a site for internal battle that affects the different industry parties, and subsequently what kind of incentives and opportunities the players are offered. Here, research by Kline et al. (2003), Kerr (2006) and Nieborg (2006, 2011), among others, proves useful.

The analysis of *DLC as a cultural text* happens in conjunction with the production layer (Chapter 4). Though political economy is sometimes criticized for stagnated views and unsuitability for cultural analysis, Kellner (2009, 102-103) stresses that, on the contrary, political economy can give a valuable contribution to textual analysis and criticism. In the contemporary media culture systems of production and distribution increasingly often shape or even dictate also the form of cultural texts (cf. Hesmondhalgh, 2002, Chapter 10). This in turn affects the impact of the texts and what can be said in them, Kellner adds (2009, 102-103). In the case of DLC, the production and the textual form blend into each other. Thus, the critical analysis must not be restricted either to production or the final cultural product – rather it is important to take into account the whole commercial process of digital games (Kline et al., 2003, 56).

Finally, *the reception of DLC* by the players gets its own chapter. Here, I will evaluate the impact of DLC through analyzing DLC discussions on user forums and official sites concerning the case game, *Skate 3*. The threads on the user forum NeoGAF work as my primary data source, which is then supported by an analysis on the official *Skate* blog discussions. Here, secondary data analysis (Carmichael, 2008; Cole et al., 2008) acts as my data collection method. Following this, the central discussion themes are then translated to themed subchapters. The analysis then uses discussion excerpts to illustrate how the DLC model is welcomed, and what kind of ramifications it has on the player community. Similar to the changes in actor roles (the ‘three circuit model’ by Kline et al.), I propose in my analysis that the transformation of the digital game into a service proves to be perplexing to players. Here, after the initial transaction, the players are inconspicuously turned into service users. Thus, the role of the gamer as a customer is extended – often without the gamer realizing this. Likewise, game industry negotiates and rationalizes its own role to gamers, trying to coax players into seeing the actions it takes from its viewpoint. Concluding the chapter, the results of reception analysis are made to discuss with the results of Chapter 4, the production and form of DLC.

3 CASE: *SKATE 3*

Skate 3 is a skateboarding sandbox game developed by EA Black Box. It was published by Electronic Arts on May 11, 2010, and it is the third game in the popular *Skate* series. It was the third main installment in the series within the same console generation. The first *Skate* was published in 2007 and was seen as a competitor to the dwindling hit franchise *Tony Hawk's Pro Skater (THPS)* (1999-2010). The series was initially profiled as a more serious, almost simulator-like alternative to the arcade play style of *THPS*, but during the years it has evolved into a more accessible and casual direction to accommodate all kinds of players.

Skate 3 is set in the fictional town of Port Carverton, a large area for free roaming and competing in various skateboarding challenges. The players take on a career mode centered on creating a successful skateboard label while unlocking new locations, challenges, boards, clothing, and other apparel. There is also a skate park creator to create your own stages, which can then be shared through the online functions of *Skate 3*. A central new feature in the game compared to *Skate 2* is the ability to create an online team with real life or AI friends and take advantage of various related online features such as sharing user-generated team logos, videos, and parks. Team and online aspects were consistently the most highlighted features in the marketing of the game. Players are also able to shoot videos or take photos, both of which can be posted online – videos even straight to YouTube through the game menu. The game features real life skateboarding brands such as Etnies and Emerica, while other brands such as Ford, T-Mobile, and Monster are also imbedded in the game.

Being a service, a console game is not limited simply to the act of playing: the developer has space 'around the game' – the in-game menu, the digital store front – to provide players with additional services such as recommendations. In *Skate 3*, game add-ons can be browsed and bought through the in-game menu, turning the game itself into a distribution channel. The first thing to come up on the screen when the game is turned on is the 'skate.Feed' news feed, where, among other information, new DLC packs are advertised. This can also be seen as turning the game into an internal and controlled market for oneself.

Prior to the release of *Skate 3* a downloadable demo of the game was released. In addition to letting the player play in a part of the game area (for 30 minutes after which the demo restarts) the demo encourages the player to recommend the game/demo to at least three of her friends (through the menu of the game). For doing this, the player is promised a small selection of extra content in the complete version of the game (presumably a digital signature on the hard drive allows this). Thus, while the player spreads the word about the game, others are being recommended content by their real life friends – a powerful marketing practice both socially and virally. Finally, as she has this way already “earned” some extra content, the player is also half committing to buy the complete game.

3.1 The DLC packs

During a time period of roughly four months, from the release of the game in May 2010 to September 2010, nine DLC packs were released for *Skate 3*:

Time Is Money Pack (released May 14, 2010) – Immediately unlocks all locations, skaters, equipment, and ‘Skate.Park’ objects that otherwise could be earned by playing through the career and online modes. (6,45€)

Skate Share Pack (released May 14, 2010) – Enables the ability to share skate creations (videos, photos, parks) as well as access to ‘Skate.Reel’ footage and custom ‘Skate.Parks’ created by the Skate community. Available for free as a one-time-use voucher code for players who buy a new/sealed copy of the game. (8,95€)

Filmer Pack (released May 14, 2010) – Gives the player more options to control the camera during video editing and adds the option of uploading videos in high resolution. (Unavailable in PSN Store as of April 2012)

Maloof Money Cup 2010 NYC Pack (released June 12, 2010) – A re-creation of the custom street park built for the 2010 Maloof Cup, a real life skateboarding prize contest. (3,95€)

Black Box Distribution Skate Park (released June 22, 2010) – A small extra skate park announced four months in advance to the game’s release as a free bonus for pre-ordering the game. Later available in the online store as paid content. (2,95€)

Danny Way's Hawaiian Dream (released July 6, 2010) – A large skate park with a lot of new skate ramps and other features. New equipment and a new Danny Way character. (6,45€)

After Dark Pack (released July 27, 2010) – Two new night-time areas and subsequently the ability to skate at night. Available free-of-charge for players who activate the ‘Skate Share Pack’ one-time voucher code included in all new game boxes.

Skate.Create Upgrade Pack (released August 17, 2010) – Two new ‘skate.Park’ lots to build in, and a host of new building pieces for skate park creation, two old characters from *Skate 2*, new Create-a-Character items, and new features to the replay editor, as well as new Miracle Whip sponsor themed items unlocked with a cheat code. (Users who did not buy the DLC pack still received the Miracle Whip items as a free update.). (6,45€)

San Van Party Pack (released September 21, 2010) – Party Play game mode, party style challenges, a large part of the Urban Rez area from the original *Skate* game, one new skate park, a large new skate.Park lot to build in, and new skate.Park pieces. (6,45€)

In addition to the Miracle Whip items available in ‘Skate.Create Upgrade Pack’, another cross-promotion, this time with Dr. Pepper, was launched a couple of months after the release of *Skate 3*. In the campaign, download codes for various EA games were distributed under Dr. Pepper bottle caps including five different minipacks for *Skate 3*:

- ***Pack 1 - Dr. Pepper Character Pack*** – A Dr. Pepper beverage helmet and two different Dr. Pepper logo t-shirts.
- ***Pack 2 - Dr. Pepper Hall of Meat Challenge*** – A single challenge that requires the player to accumulate a bail score by bouncing off of giant Dr. Pepper balloon cans.
- ***Pack 3 - Dr. Pepper Film Challenge*** – A single challenge that requires the player to skate a line through a Dr. Pepper branded event in the Downtown section.
- ***Pack 4 - Dr. Pepper Skate.Park Pack*** – Unlocks the unique objects ‘Dr. Pepper Bouncy Balloon Can’ and ‘Dr. Pepper Vending Machine’ for the Park Creator.

- **Pack 5 - Dr. Pepper Man Can** – Skate as a man-sized Dr. Pepper can man around Port Carverton.

Later it became apparent that the download site at drpepper.com made the content available only for the Xbox 360 version of the game and only in the United States. Confusingly, the Dr. Pepper content could still be seen in the game menu both in all the other territories (besides US) and also on PS3.

The skateboarding theme emerges as a perfect opportunity to update the game regularly. There are several categories to update, from equipment to skaters and environments. The skate culture is happening right now, meaning that anything going on in the real world of skating – such as the actual Maloof Money Cup – can be imported quickly to the game and made to mirror actual events. The skateboard culture is known for always seeking new areas to appropriate for their own uses (Quart, 2003). In a way, this act of repurposing is remediated in *Skate 3* through the regular introduction of new skate arenas in the DLC packs. *Skate 3* features also an editor mode, which can be updated through DLC, a strategy poignantly exemplified by games like *LittleBigPlanet*.

The skateboard culture is, and has been, a very trendy segment of the entertainment industry. Skateboarding was seen as a huge business opportunity already as early as the late 1970s, as the sport attracted tens of millions of enthusiasts (Borden, 2001). At the same time *SkateBoarder* magazine had over one million readers (ibid.). Twenty years later, at the start of the 2000s, Activision estimated a sponsored logo in a *Tony Hawk* game got one billion “quality brand impressions” from the players of the game (Quart, 2003). Advertisers care about the fact that skate areas are spaces the youth visit repeatedly, be it an actual skate park or a video game space (ibid.). This connection presents also ample opportunities for campaign-like marketing DLC is well suited for.

3.2 Electronic Arts

Over the past decade, the digital games industry has seen extensive conglomeration, consolidation, and vertical integration (Kerr, 2006). Industry giants Nintendo, Sony and Microsoft have outsourced large parts of their production from developed countries to places like Mexico and Brazil “in an attempt to exploit cheaper labor, shorter distances to major markets, and just-in-time inventory management structures” (Kerr, 2006, 77;

Kline et al. 2003, 205-209). In the light of these efforts, it is easy to see why the games industry is gradually moving towards distributing software digitally. In particular, one of the two largest publishers in the world, Electronic Arts (EA), has been experimenting with various new strategies concerning digital distribution and downloadable content.

EA is mostly known for releasing yearly installments of its major sports franchises, updated only with yearly player statistics and minor cosmetic enhancements. The company readily admits that franchises are a major part of their strategy since they allow them to publish new titles on a recurring basis based on the same property (Electronic Arts, 2010). Besides being a publisher, EA develops games both in-house and through the development studios it acquires. It has further consolidated its operations by buying physical distributing channels and establishing online storefronts for digital distribution (Dyer-Witthford & de Peuter, 2009).

Perhaps a downfall due to its massive size, the company has been the target of many accusations over the years. During the ‘EA Spouse’ incident in 2003, a wife of an EA worker brought to light how the company was exploiting its work force to exhaustion without any compensation (ibid.). Known for its ubiquitous sports franchises, EA has also been criticized for shamelessly re-releasing its sports games every year with only one or two essential improvements. Describing EA for the Worst Company in America 2012 feature – a title which EA eventually won –, *The Consumerist* wrote:

“EA is among the industry leaders in pushing for more and more ‘microtransactions’ in users' gaming experience. For its major titles it seems to be creating exclusive and add-on content, not with the game in mind, but with the sole intention of milking consumers who may not realize how quickly those small purchases add up.

And unlike the fee-happy discount airlines that use the ‘everything is a la carte’ model to keep base prices low, a new EA game will run you \$60 for the most basic version available, making it easily the most expensive form of home entertainment.

Many of EA's sports titles — especially its Madden NFL franchise — are bestsellers with annual releases and exclusivity deals with the corresponding leagues. This means that no

one else can enter the market to compete with a lower-price NFL game, effectively allowing EA to set the price for new releases.”¹

During the last couple of years EA has both corrected some of its transgressions and adopted a host of new controversial business models. The company has clearly started to fund more experimental projects, buying successful and innovative development studios such as BioWare. EA has persistently entered the Facebook gaming scene and it is also one of the most diligent users of DLC, experimenting vigorously with different tactics and building cross-promotion between its games. One of the most celebrated games to implement a robust DLC model was the racing game *Burnout Paradise* (2008), published by EA. During the first year after its release, *Burnout Paradise* was significantly changed through free online updates in a marketing campaign called “The Year of the Paradise”. Among the new features were a day/night-cycle, weather effects, new vehicles including the introduction of motorcycles, and several new game modes including many new online modes.

Many of the online functionalities in EA’s games have been tied under an ‘EA Account’. Recently, the company stated it plans to create persistent player profiles that work in all of its games regardless of genre and platform (Nelson, 2011). EA has also introduced its own digital distribution market place, Origin, to compete directly with Steam, the current market leader in the PC digital distribution space. One of the ways to persuade player-customers to this new service has been to turn EA’s favorite franchises, such as the BioWare developed *Mass Effect* (2007-2012), to Origin exclusives in the digital distribution side. It is EA, then, who presents itself as the poster child of the best and the worst possibilities of the new digital distribution space.

¹ <http://consumerist.com/2012/04/worst-company-in-america-2012-final-death-match-bank-of-america-vs-ea.html>

4 THE PRODUCTION OF DLC

As described in the introduction, the focus of this thesis is on the development, institutions, forms and effects of DLC. Following the three-fold analysis model of the media industries, the first two areas, 1) *the political economy and the production of DLC*, and 2) *the cultural texts*, are analyzed in this chapter. Accordingly, the chapter is presented in these two sections. I will first give an overview of the historical trajectory of the game industry as a part of the post-Fordist industry from the political economy perspective. I then go over the changes and development of the digital game marketplace in this new light. Here, I aim to illustrate some of the conditions and urgencies that seemingly continuously force the industry practices to more intense directions. After this, the focus is then turned on the two most significant aspects for DLC in particular, digital distribution and the game-as-a-service model. My intent here is to give the reader a better understanding of the trajectories leading to DLC.

In the second part, the cultural texts, the DLC packs of *Skate 3*, are analyzed. Here the focus is strongly on DLC as a set of marketing practices. Through the lens of political economy, my target is to highlight what kind of ramifications these marketing practices entail on the gaming culture surrounding the DLC console game. In the chapter conclusion I intend to give an overview of the ways DLC continues the existing marketing and franchising efforts implemented by the gaming industry and in what ways these practices are remodeled into something new.

I will get back to the third part of the three-fold model, *the reception and effects of the cultural texts*, in its own chapter, Chapter 5.

4.1 The ideal commodity

The political analysis of digital games links many of the current industry trajectories to the appearance of post-Fordism. Starting in 1970s, the post-Fordist society pursued economic growth through high-income consumers of the emerging computer generation. It cut down expenses mainly by moving hard labor to cheaper countries, robotizing as much of the production as possible, and by integrating and consolidating production, distribution, and marketing. Its logic rose from military and surveillance technology of

the cold war – technology now used for developing marketing techniques, computerization, and mediatized entertainment. (Kline et al., 2003, 64-65) The core of the post-Fordist period, which we are still living, is in information capitalism: production of innovation and accumulation of knowledge in order to create new products (ibid. 66). Besides mere advertising, the post-Fordist marketing machinery aims to collect customer preference and habitual data from each transaction, which then is used to shape future marketing and products (ibid. 57). "The aim is to 'close the loop' between corporation and consumer", Kline et al. argue (ibid.).

Political economy analysis on the post-Fordist regime translates tellingly on digital game industry. The game industry is in perpetual turbulence and in dire need of both radical and incremental innovation. It has been honing the “perfect product” through various controversial franchising practices at different channels, eliminating competition and cutting down costs all over. Through the convergence of media into all-purpose technologies, it has also secured a direct access to our living rooms. Through this access, Meehan (2000) argues, media and advertising are now gradually weaved into our everyday life. Kline et al. go as far as to label digital games as the ideal post-Fordist commodity: “instantaneous, experiential, fluid, flexible, heterogeneous, customized, portable, and permeated by a fashion with form and style” (2003, 74). Digital games were almost immediately selected for commercial development, and in their digital form were born for agile production, iteration, remixing, copying, and distribution through digital networks. Like post-Fordism, the digital game industry is ever-intensifying through its ubiquitous marketing and ruthlessly innovating in its data gathering efforts.

In the techno-capitalist games industry marketing has become such a dominant force, that it even necessitates what skills are needed to make a game (for an overview see Sotamaa et al. 2011). The “three circuit model” by Kline et al. (2003, 50-58) highlights this cross pressure of different forces – technological innovation, cultural diversification, and globalized consumerism – digital games exist in. The three circuits of the model are *culture* (cultural texts; designing and playing games), *technology* (physical games, computers, consoles; the technological infrastructure the game industry operates by), and *marketing* (research, advertising, branding). Each circuit is seen as a process that ties makers, products/texts, and reception into itself. In the ‘culture’ subcircuit there are *designers*, *games*, and *players*; ‘technology’ includes *programmers*, *consoles*, and *users*; and finally, in ‘marketing’ there are *marketers*, *commodities*, and *consumers*.

(Ibid. 52-53) Thus, contemporary game designers and programmers are not only that, but also "marketers" (cf. free-to-play games; Tyni et al. 2011), while players are not only players, but as importantly "users" and "consumers".

After contextualizing game industry as a part of the larger economic paradigm, I will now move on to examine more closely the game industry as a business sector.

4.2 Mapping the digital game marketplace

Analyzing the dominant trends in game industry, Kerr (2006, 66) lists the increased consolidation between the various industry sectors and the rising costs of development. Consolidation refers to the industry practice of integration up and down the product cycle and, to a lesser extent but still importantly, horizontal and diagonal spreading to neighboring marketing segments (ibid.). As a result of consolidation and the integrated power of the platform holders (resulting from consolidation), game industry, like the film industry before it, is increasingly in all its levels owned by only a few corporations. These biggest companies rely on a handful of cultivated key franchises, which then are strived to make even bigger (Crawford & Rutter, 2006, 151). The strategy is mainly explained by the necessity dictated by the unforgiving and unpredictable business sector. Large corporations have shareholders to appease and producing yearly installments of key franchises is a relatively risk-free way of creating sustainability (Nieborg, 2006). The profit flow from these safe-bets is the reason smaller, weaker franchises can be published at all (Hesmondhalgh, 2002, 21).

The other significant challenge is the constant rise in production costs. Roughly speaking, contemporary AAA games require two years of development time and a work force of hundreds. To combat these costs, Kerr argues, companies need to exploit the 'economies of scale' and 'scope', (2006, 67-68). Due to their high cost, AAA games need to sell a remarkable number of copies to break even. As already the advertising costs for these games rise to significant heights, only the companies that are actually capable of facilitating a launch for a potential million seller are able to compete in the AAA sector. Economies of scale refer to the tendency to lower costs of a single unit through high production numbers and the subsequent ability to push the release forward in every major advertising and retail channel.

On the other hand, to reduce the uncertainty of demand, companies need to diversify the range of products they are offering for example through variations of existing products. This is called economies of scope. As the majority of games never manage to turn profit and the few successful releases are relied to finance everything, publishers need to make sure their product lineup covers as many customer segments as possible. (Kerr 2006, 69; Crawford & Rutter, 2006, 151) The largest publishers like EA and Activision-Blizzard approach this through the convergence of media content: besides various games of different genres, a proven brand name can be accessed through neighboring sectors such as comics and animations. Here, the different media products act as “gates” to the same franchise (Jenkins, 2003; Schell, 2008, 301), ideally then “pouring” customers to other parts of the brand world (Kelly, 2010).

Besides these, one other industry coping mechanism Kerr brings up is the heavy reliance on licensed content (2006, 69-70). Through the use of a license, a developer gets the right to use an intellectual property in agreed ways. Besides developing a straight forward licensed game, game studio may want to buy the right to use simply the likeness and voice of a recognizable character or even real world people such as movie stars and athletes. Games can for example incorporate characters from popular comic books, publisher’s other games, or even characters from competitors’ games for the mutual benefit of both parties. More than anything, licensing relies on the notion of the familiar property being “pre-sold” (Schatz, 1993) – that is, some or all of the expensive marketing has already been taken care of. Sport franchises like EA’s *Tiger Woods* are sold as long as Tiger Woods continues to play well, while *Harry Potter* games are, in a way, advertised with every Harry Potter movie and book.

Among other things, Kerr notes, it is interesting to see how these strategies affect the ability of other players to enter the market sector and the diversity of products produced (2006, 67). To answer this, one central way the networked console has undeniably and profoundly transformed the power structures associated with the digital game markets are the distribution channels and game-services.

4.3 The impact of the networked console

In updating our understanding of the digital games marketplace to the present-day level, we have to consider the significance of the networked game console. In the view of this

study, standardizing the console network connection has had two significant functions (besides networked play): 1) the ability to sell player-customers content directly to their living room via digital distribution, and 2) the ability to continue maintaining a service relationship with the player – both important components of the post-Fordist marketplace.

4.3.1 Digital distribution

First, the online connection has created sizeable new audiences open for advertising. Game industry, too, depends increasingly on selling its audiences to advertisers, and increasingly games like *Skate 3* include ads – openly or covertly – in them. In fact, every moment a player spends online – even when she is not doing anything – generates a sellable product, an audience. The mere feeling of co-habiting a populated online community has significant value for the game companies.

Because of the over-abundance of supply, one of the most important parts of the digital marketplace is to secure a foothold. This means leveraging whatever means in order to make the customers visit often. With digital distribution it has become possible not only to sell download-only games for higher profit margins but also to turn games themselves into advertising and distribution channels. Networked console games can now advertise products such as add-on content inconspicuously in-game, while more unrestricted ecosystems like Apple's App Store have made it possible for games like *Angry Birds* to quickly and effectively inform players about everything from related games to merchandise like plush toys. Some scholars, such as Ip (2008), even propose a coming marketplace convergence where third parties could inhabit other publishers' games to actively sell their own products.

Second, the consolidation Kerr describes (see previous chapter) has received new forms since the time she conducted her study in 2006. In analyzing the networks of power in the current game industry it is important to notice how all the traditional key parties of the video game production cycle fight for control – often directly at the expense of each other. Here digital distribution steps in.

Traditionally the video game production cycle has been based on incremental value chain. For the customer to get a hold of the game, the game has to be financed, developed, marketed, packaged, distributed, and sold. This means that besides the developer,

there are a host of other parties taking their share of the profits.² Even in the best case scenario, when working on an internally developed intellectual property (IP), the profit share for the developer has remained in 10 per cent. Traditionally, in order to finance the development, the developer has sold the production to the publisher. Because most game productions are a financial risk, the publisher has also usually demanded full IP rights for the game. The role of the developer has been akin to a subcontractor, while the publisher has taken most of the risk – and the reward. Digital distribution has been occasionally hailed for liberating game development from the shackles of incremental value chain. As the typical digital market place takes 30 per cent of the profits, the share of the game developer has, in best cases, increased from 10% up to as high as 70%. This has allowed many small developers to retain IP rights to their titles – in many views the most important effect of the digital distribution. (Sotamaa et al., 2011)

Since the introduction of online marketplaces and especially the smart phone gaming, the gaming industry has seen a significant turn to an *app-based economy*. Widely introduced by Apple, the app-based economy has both become a major economic might and heavy-handedly remodelled the markets for all digital content. In the post-Fordist society mass market breaks down into customized and segmented micro markets (Kline et al., 2003, 64). Hesmondhalgh (2002, 2) describes how all around the cultural industries a greater emphasis is now placed on researching and addressing niche audiences. As user taste is changing increasingly fast, the move towards smaller game content and casual play habits (cf. Juul, 2009) – but now on an international level – has become profitable. Developed rapidly, bite-sized content is quick to react to market changes, thus having strategic agility. Cheaper development allows the possibility of developing and owning own IP. Shortened product cycle allows faster rate of profit compared to traditional manufacturing (Kline et al., 2003, 67). On a negative side, the saturated market increases the risk involved (too much competition), as does the even smaller time window of reacting. Together with applications sold to smart phones and tablet computers, DLC too can be seen connecting to this wider phenomenon of bite-sized software.

² It has been estimated that of the retail value of the game the console manufacturer traditionally gets 20%; developer and publisher 40% (combined); distributor 10% and retailer 30% (Johns, 2005).

Yet, instead of some kind of new democracy within game distribution, it seems that many times new gatekeepers simply replace the old. Ideally, digital marketplaces offer every game equal “self-space”. Still, even a seemingly democratic service like Steam chooses to lift up certain games in their ‘featured’ and ‘game of the week’ sections. Poignantly exemplified by the success of *Angry Birds*, the games that top the charts often continue to do so due to the fact that customers do not bother to look beyond the top charts. Because of the visibility they get, top games continue to benefit from an enduring “snowball effect”. As one developer put it, now “the dude who controls the featured list becomes the one you need to know” (Sotamaa et al., 2011, 15). Moreover, to get noticed in the over-abundance of content, companies need to continually grow their marketing resources (ibid.). As many developers lack the heavy marketing budget – needed also in the digital market space –, they simply have to continue to rely on the big publishers. Overwhelmingly, most successful small apps are either a part of a larger product family, connect directly to a larger parent product, or are leveraged into view by huge corporations such as Apple. It is also important to remember that the majority of the major game developers are owned by publishers like EA.

Finally, digital distribution has had a perhaps even bigger impact on the publishers and marketplace owners. The introduction of digital distribution channels has meant that the traditional brick-and-mortar retail chains like GameStop – multi-billion dollar companies themselves – are directly attacked and cut out of the product cycle. By bypassing traditional distribution and retail, the introduction of digital distribution can be seen as a strategic move of vertical expansion by the console manufacturer to cut down costs and to strengthen its own position at the top of the production cycle. Gatekeepers of the earlier model, retail and distribution, have been forced to watch aside while the command has been wrested from their hands. (Sotamaa et al., 2011) In response, retail has focused aggressively on used games sales. The used games market is one of the key areas where game developers feel they are losing money, as all the profits from there go to retailers.³

³ For example Quantic dream, the developer of the PS3 title *Heavy Rain* (a game that does not implement any robust DLC strategy) reports that although the game sold 2 million copies, the PS3 trophy records show that 3 million users played the game, costing the company an estimated 5-10 million euros in revenue losses (Crossley, 2011).

Compared to new games, GameStop for example earns twice as much from used games (Kane & Bustillo, 2009), so it does not come as a surprise that retailers are more and more accentuating on the second-hand market. In a cycle of antipathy, this in turn has angered developers and publishers.

4.3.2 Game as a service

With the introduction of the console online connection developer-publishers are not anymore restricted to selling games in one transaction. Describing the rise of the “service paradigm”, Stenros and Sotamaa (2009) note how many recent game industry trends such as digital distribution and the various subscription models such as free-to-play gaming have made “games, more or less, available as services.” Here, games are viewed as ongoing activities that transform games from commodities to services that can be maintained, supported, updated, and so on.

This rise of the “service paradigm” can be seen both in larger console eco-systems and in single games. On the level of consoles, the gist of the service is formed by the operating system, the online marketplace, and the various ways the console lets players connect with each other. Console manufacturers use this kind of integration of previously separate domains to tighten their own control over the console game production cycle while simultaneously offering publishers new ways to combat the shared enemy, the retail.

On the level of single player games, services come in many shapes. Not anymore limited to persistent-world games like MMOs, single player games also are treated as services by the game industry. Besides updating and maintaining the game, this can mean helping players choose the right game, facilitating and assisting the actual play, and helping players to socialize (ibid.), to name some examples. For instance, *Call of Duty: Elite* provides players with lifetime statistics across the popular *Call of Duty* games as well as a host of social-networking options. The subscription based portion of Elite costs 59,95€ a year and, aside from some free features, gives access to exclusive premium features such as monthly DLC, the ability to level up one’s clan, daily competitions with virtual and real life prizes, pro analysis and strategies, Elite TV, and more.

As a consequence, increasingly often even single player games are server-dependent. As Stenros and Sotamaa (2009) note, this has produced a unique “chargeable commodity”

while at the same time giving the publisher-developer an increased control over piracy and other possible misconducts in the online gaming space. In most cases, players connecting their game to the associated online service are prompted to accept the game company's end-user license agreement (EULA) — according to law, at this point the game product becomes merely a key to a game service. Increasingly, this is the case even with single-player games connected to the Internet.

Toivonen and Sotamaa (2010) conducted a study on user attitudes over digital marketplaces. Answered by 1184 respondents in total, the study asked “what do you find important in relation to downloading games”, a question clearly aimed at evaluating different facets of the service experience. The most common answers were wide selection of content, affordability, and easy usability including the payment transactions. As a result, Toivonen and Sotamaa argue that designing a pleasant service experience might now be as important as the design of the actual game (ibid.). This is more evident in console marketplaces which, compared to PC side, are more tightly integrated to the interface. Furthermore, the service reaches console users even if they do not play any games, as they are regularly asked to download updates also for their operating systems.

As described, it is an imperative for the largest game companies to center on creating sustainability to their business (Kerr, 2006; Nieborg, 2006). As the costs of the biggest game productions have soared and as the traditional market leaders such as EA and Activision-Blizzard face increasingly tough competition from emerging gaming sectors, companies seem to be more pressured than ever to broaden their marketing repertoire and utilize whatever means necessary to stay competitive. Both extending franchises through digital distribution channels and turning a product into a service aim to increase the predictability of the business. While proven franchises are easier to anticipate, the networked service provides the developer-publisher with elaborate feedback on user behavior and keeps her constantly within the sphere of the game. Notably, these two areas are melded in the DLC model.

4.4 Downloadable add-on content as a marketing tool

Majority of the marketing strategies and development trends I have so far covered can be seen leading to DLC. The roots of DLC can certainly be traced back to video game franchising, mods, and expansion packs. As a franchising practice creating longevity

through various games, DLC can be used to bridge audience attention between main installments of the series. As the risks of releasing a new IP or even a sequel have risen so high, DLC has stepped out as a solution for many problems. The profit margin for DLC is excellent as there are no reproduction costs and no need to create physical copies for retail. Spawning “must-have” add-ons at the side of a successful game has proven to be one of the most logical steps to safely expand the game series.

In this light, I will next analyze how DLC is used as a tool for marketing in *Skate 3*. Here, mediatized marketing is understood both as selling own media products and advertising others' products. Besides the obvious benefits of digital distribution and “branched serialization”, five other strategic functions are outlined in the following. As a “reward” of sorts, DLC is perfectly suited for leveraging gamers to buy new games instead of second-hand copies. Because it is available only in the online form, DLC is a good means to guide players to a networked service relationship. Introduced regularly it can be used to uphold a service and prolong gamers' interest in the game. Because of its smaller size, DLC is quickly developed and can be marketed to a “proven” audience through the networked game itself. Through DLC developers are able to give players room to customize their gaming experience to their liking. DLC is also a good tool for advertisement deals and tying franchises together through the introduction of “visiting” franchise content.

The list presented here is by no means a definitive account of the subject, but rather an attempt to draft some of the ways that business rationalizes the use of DLC. I intend the list to be pragmatic and inspirational rather than dogmatic. The adopted perspective is mainly that of the game industry in order to give a more defined counter-point to the player standpoint of Chapter 5. As corporations like EA utilize a lot of marketing integration between their games, additional marketing practices not included in this list are covered elsewhere in this thesis through examples drawn from EA's other DLC games.

As suggested, the cultural analysis of DLC must not forget the textual dimension. DLC poignantly illustrates how marketing principles have shaped the form of the digital game. From the viewpoint of critical political economy it is important to examine in what ways, if any, this development has been detrimental to game culture. I have incorporated the textual analysis of DLC in this chapter, while the impact of this transformation is further elaborated in the next main chapter, Chapter 5.

4.4.1 Directing and controlling sales

There are various ways that DLC can help mitigate risk and create sustainability by directing sales. First, as it is important to make as big an impact as possible at the launch of the game, pre-order bonuses can be used to increase first day sales. The players of *Skate 3* were offered an exclusive ‘Black Box Distribution Park’ DLC free-of-charge for pre-ordering the game. One of the biggest risks for a medium sized game with limited advertising budget such as *Skate 3* is to be buried under other, bigger releases in a busy season. A robust DLC support can be seen to spread the critical launch period over a wider time scale, creating several “micro-launches”, and in this way moderating the risk that otherwise would be solely tied to the launch of the game.

Second, with advertised DLC support, developers can combat used game sales through two methods. First, players can be promised free DLC for buying the game new. Second, continuing DLC support – and giving impression the support will go on – can be seen to aim to stop the player from selling the game. As described (in chapter 4.3.1), the second hand market is a key area for developer losses, as all the profits from used games go to retailers. As a precautionary measure on part of EA, those *Skate 3* players who bought their game copies new were able to download the ‘Skate Share Pack’ DLC free-of-charge through inputting a one-time-use voucher code shipped with each game box. Later, the same players received another DLC pack, ‘After Dark’ for free, as a “Thank You” for buying the game new⁴. Finally, besides the second-hand shoppers, players renting the game need to actually buy any DLC pack they wish to play. All of these strategies profit the developer instead of the retailer and factor clearly in the fight over the incremental production cycle.

4.4.2 Initiating a service relationship

As described, turning games into services has many advantages. Thus, it is in the developers’ interests to persuade the player into a service relationship. As DLC in itself forms a big part of a service, and at the same time requires the player to use one (the proprie-

⁴ <http://skate.ea.com/blog.action#blogId=skateblog-july22-20100724050659449.xml>

tary online store), players can be accustomed to a service by simply placing anticipated game content or game elements into a DLC pack. ‘Skate Share Pack’, described above, while free for the buyers of a new copy, charges others 8,45€ for sharing and accessing the skate parks created by the community — a clear caveat for many modern players focused on online play with friends. Significantly, ‘Skate Share Pack’ seemed to act as a precursor for one of the major DLC strategies since *Skate 3*: the online pass. In many other EA games, notably in many of their sport franchises, a feature called ‘Online Pass’ provides buyers of a new copy with a one-time-use access code to online features of the game. Those without the code – presumably renters or buyers of a used game copy – are charged 10€ for the connection.

Additionally, when *Skate 3* demo version came out prior to the release of the main game, developers made it possible for players to recommend the demo from the in-game menu, through the respective networks of both PS3 and Xbox 360. By recommending the game at least to three friends, players could unlock extra items for the full game. Besides acting as clever viral marketing, this too was a case of promising players game content should they continue the relationship with Black Box/EA.

4.4.3 Maintaining the service relationship

A steady DLC line-up can significantly increase the lifespan of a game. The shelf life of videogames is getting shorter, and in their annual report, EA proclaims to “mitigate this trend” by offering their consumers “new direct-to-consumer services such as additional content to further enhance the gaming experience and extend the time consumers play our games after their initial purchase” (Electronic Arts, 2010). Those *Skate 3* players who activated their one-time-use voucher code received later yet another DLC pack free-of-charge, signaling perhaps that those who buy their games new are viewed as ‘premium subscribers’ by EA. While *Skate 3* was supported for four months with nine DLC packs, for example *Mass Effect 2* (2010), another game published by EA, got its latest DLC in April 2011, well over a year after its release in January 2010. It is also customary for well-supported games to eventually package all the DLC packs in one ‘Game of the Year’ edition, and this way gain one last sales spike for the game (though this never happened with *Skate 3*).

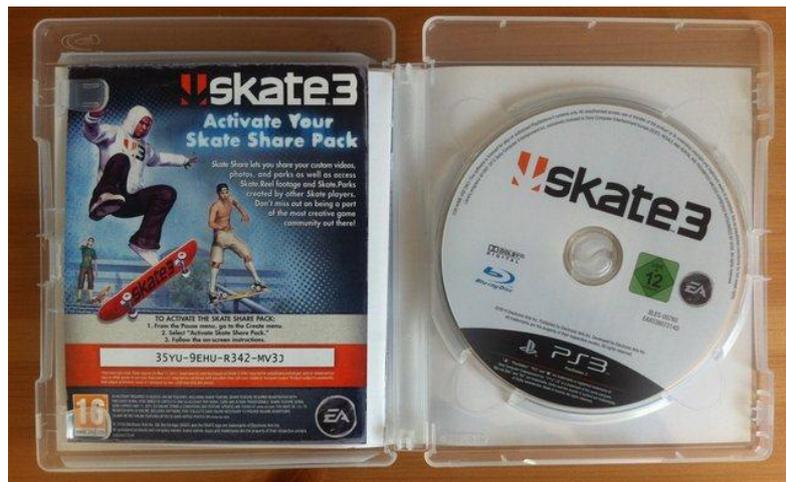


Figure 1. The Skate Share Pack one-time-use voucher code slip (Tyni, 2012)

Another publisher, Warner Bros., was the first to introduce a “season pass”, a long-term DLC plan, where the player pays upfront for all the future DLC packs the game is going to receive. In this case the developer-publisher chooses to take a risk on the game with promising a set number of DLC packs upfront (generally, it is not profitable to continue creating DLC for a game that has initially flopped), while the player-customer trusts the extra content to be good enough without prior testing or reviews.

4.4.4 Extending and enriching gameplay

Perhaps most obviously DLC can be used to improve, augment, and extend the gameplay experience in various ways. By offering more stages, challenges, characters, and equipment, to name but a few, the player can be allowed to create the kind of package she wants — essentially the value proposition behind creating an expandable service. The game experience can also be augmented more profoundly, for example by introducing new conditions, as was done with the night-time stages of the *Skate 3* DLC ‘After Dark’. In ‘Maloof Money Cup’ DLC the actual New York based street contest of the same name was transferred into the game. Here DLC was used to react to a current event in a way that was meaningful for most skateboard fans. Further, ‘San Van Party Pack’ re-introduced a ‘party’ gameplay mode already familiar from *Skate 2*.

Players can also be sold many kinds of gameplay enhancements. In *Skate 3*, the ‘Filmer Pack’ DLC provides the player with advanced video editing tools and better options for uploading them. ‘Skate.Create Upgrade Pack’ increases the options in building player created skate parks and characters. Notably, both of these are more or less socially con-

textualized, as both packs can be seen to help the player create more impressive – and shareable – content in the eyes of the *Skate* community. Finally, time, too, can be sold. Players who prefer to cut some corners can unlock all locations, skaters, and equipment through the ‘Time Is Money’ DLC, perhaps reflecting the game industry’s need to also accommodate the more casual players. This tendency to offer players advancement in the game for a fee is clearly connected to similar practices familiar from free-to-play games (cf. Tyni et al. 2011) and to the broader casual gaming turn overall (cf. Juul, 2009).

It is notable that in some cases console DLC might end up being in direct conflict with user-generated content. In games with robust level editors – such as *Skate 3* – players have the possibility to actually re-create some of the add-on content sold at the marketplace. *Skate 3* users have tried to copy at least the Black Box Distribution Park⁵, found within the associated DLC. It is also important to remember that the notion of buying new play content is not as enticing when even the possibility of creating user content exists. On the other hand, we have to remember that the ability to upload and download user-generated content in *Skate 3* is sold to the player in a DLC pack to begin with. The editor mode was also updated with a (not free) DLC pack.

Finally, the larger DLC packs of *Skate 3* (‘Danny Way’, ‘Maloof’, ‘San Van’) add also achievements, thus extending the game for players concentrating on collecting achievements.

4.4.5 Advertising, sponsor deals, and cross promotion

Compared to complete games, DLC is cheaper and quicker to develop, as there usually is no need to develop new technology for it — only content. This way it gives strategic agility to react faster to changes in the business environment. All media industries depend on crafting audiences and selling them, or at least their attention, to advertisers (Meehan, 2000, 77; Kline et al. 2003, 39). As we pay media corporations for access to media experiences, advertisers pay for access to us (Meehan, 2000, 77). In a way, the

⁵ <http://skate.ea.com/gallery?contentType=PARK&platform=xbox#itemId=1974026>

DLC model turns the networked game into an advertising channel. *Skate* games are populated by a very specific interest group, certain to draw the attention of marketers from related sectors. In *Skate 3*, new editor pieces were distributed in cross-promotion campaigns with the soft drink brand Dr. Pepper and the salad dressing brand Miracle Whip. In the latter campaign, Miracle Whip themed props were made available for downloading, and a contest for cleverly using these props was opened. In the winning video, a human sized steak skateboards in a giant kitchen, finally ending up on a hot stove, starting to fry. While somewhere else this would seem ridiculous, the context of the skate culture instantly turns it into a hilarious, self-conscious sensation.

The use of a star system is one of the premier formatting strategies and an EA hallmark (*Madden*, *Tiger Woods*; real life player rosters in almost all of their games). Despite not using a name of a real life skateboarding celebrity in the title of the *Skate* series (like in *Tony Hawk's Pro Skater*), the popular actor and former pro-skater Jason Lee appears in *Skate 3* as “Coach Frank”, the host of the game, with the voice and the likeness of the actor. Further, a star name does appear in the title of the ‘Danny Way’s Hawaiian Dream’ DLC pack. In a promotional behind-the-scenes video released by EA, the ‘Danny Way’ pack was framed in a way that gives the impression of Way not only endorsing the new Hawaiian stage but even partly designing it. In the video, a fan question posed to Way asks if he has “a DLC in the works”, to which Way answers: “The Hawaii compound [...] it's pretty much my dream compound. [...] They took elements from the drawings we had into that, but then they refined those and added some new things”⁶. Thus, it seems as though DLC presents itself as a potent vehicle to introduce “visiting artists” for the mutual benefit of the artist and the developer. Conveniently, since DLC is optional, those who want to keep their games free from these additional advertisements are allowed to do so.

DLC can also be used to cross-promote other titles by the developer/publisher. Hesmondhalgh (2002, 279) describes how product placement many times disguises as “hip cynicism”. The character ‘Isaac’ from another EA hit game, *Dead Space*, can be

⁶ <http://www.geek.com/articles/games/ea-releases-skate-3-danny-ways-hawaiian-dream-dlc-2010076/>

unlocked in *Skate 3*, and while the heavily armored sci-fi character looks laughable in an ordinary city environment, he was warmly welcomed by skaters eager to fool around. Finally, characters and stages from the previous two games in the franchise have been introduced to part three via different DLC packs, perhaps eliciting those feelings of ‘classic features’ and nostalgia.

4.5 Chapter conclusions: leverage through fragmentation

Concluding this analysis chapter we now see how DLC continues many of the franchising strategies evident already for many years not only in the gaming industry, but also more broadly in the cultural industries. We can also safely say that the DLC model has undeniably affected the form of the contemporary video game, as games are now created, marketed, distributed, and sold in small segments.

It is important to notice which parts of the production cycle most benefit from the new marketplace characterized by digital distribution and the game-as-a-service. While developers now have more chances to retain their IP rights, it is the publisher and the marketplace platform holder who seem to benefit the most from the integration and consolidation of the digital game marketplace – contrary to what some researchers have suggested (Jöckel et al., 2008). Even though it first seemed that the platform holders were cutting the publisher out of the production cycle, the likes of EA seem to be doing fine.

Analyzing the production and distribution of *Skate 3* DLC reveals several things. First of all, DLC presents itself as a practical tool to carry on the marketing practices laid out by previous franchising. It is an inexpensive way to keep the franchise alive and visible until the next main installment. It offers a way for spreading the “launch” of the game over a longer period of time. As it is optional for the players, DLC provides also a relatively risk free method to experiment with new ideas and strategies. Following the “economies of scope”, it incorporates an expanded set of features into one game thus widening the target demographic for the title and acting against the volatility of audiences. DLC is also used for all sorts of advertising and cross-promotion purposes. Campaigns such as the one with Dr. Pepper aim both to drive the soft-drink sales and to create brand visibility in the shared online space for the purposes of viral marketing. Characters from publisher’s other games can be recycled and reused by introducing them through DLC to build new bases of fandom. Following Quart (2003; see chapter 3.1),

additional “quality brand impressions” can be achieved through agile implementation of brands and licensed content in DLC.

Further, visible within the DLC system is the fact how marketing imperatives have shaped the form of the digital game to better answer their needs. Through leveraging the fragmented form of the DLC game, options open for controlling both the competition and the player population. Digital games are what Hesmondhalgh (2002, 21) calls “semi-public goods”. As games can be used again after consumption, it is in the interests of the gaming companies to artificially limit this secondary access to them. DLC provides a solution to this, as it is bound to the first buyer and cannot be sold forward. To get the “full experience”, second-hand users, too, must pay. At least potentially, DLC can be used for exploiting the power this production structure has over individual. Players are enticed to buy more expensive new game copies, coaxed into service relationships, and leveraged towards other franchises. A central method here is to utilize DLC’s fragmented form and use DLC packs for rewarding players when they conform to the marketing plan.

Indeed, it is clearly visible here how the production system shapes DLC as a cultural text. The textual form of DLC is strongly tied to the ways DLC is produced and distributed. As Kellner (2009, 102-103) describes, critical analysis of the production system might reveal what kind of texts and for what purposes can be produced, what can and what cannot be said, and what kinds of effects the texts have on the audience. Methodologically it is important to note how the analysis works also the other way around. The textual analysis of DLC provides a vivid colorization of the marketing imperatives behind the model. First, the digital distribution channel dictates the small size of the DLC. Second, my analysis has also shown how it is through careful consideration which parts of the game are placed on the DLC packs. If a creator mode exists in the game, essential improvements for it are positioned on a DLC.

Finally, it is also relevant to ask how the content is sold in its new form. DLC gives a wide variety of pricing options to each need. Curiously, in a few (notorious) cases Microsoft has even forced a developer to charge for DLC even though the developer has wanted to offer the content for free (Epic Games, *Gears of War*, 2006). An explanation could be to cover the maintenance costs – or, simply the fact that the platform holder gets a small share of every transaction.

5 THE RECEPTION OF DLC

After discussing the corporate strategies we now move on to analyze the audience reception over *Skate 3* DLC. The aim of this chapter is to observe in what ways, if any, DLC as a marketing strategy conflicts with the interests of players. I ask what kind of effects the model has had on players as individuals and as a community. And, if the gaming experience *has* changed somehow, it is relevant to ask how the players are coping in this new media environment.

My intention is to better understand the player standpoint and gain a counterpoint for the industry perspective. I want to see how DLC is generally regarded and how DLC model as a service system works for the gamers. My hypotheses are 1) that the reception over DLC is greatly varied and based on matters of taste, and that there is no possibility to achieve any kind of definite truth about DLC (aside from problematizing any given truths by the game industry), 2) that players do not entirely understand, nor approve, game industry DLC practices, and 3) that the service mentality associated with DLC conflicts with the fact that game companies cease maintaining these services.

In the first subchapter I will discuss the methodological considerations of the study, including utilizing forum discussions as a primary source in examining online player communities. I will then turn to illustrate the various opinions players harbor towards DLC: by analyzing discussions on several different player forums, players are discovered both to appreciate new content and lament the ways EA treats its customers. Here, the atmosphere regarding DLC is divided in to four subchapters: 1) pre-launch period, including player thoughts on the release schedule, 2) post-launch period, including how *Skate 3* and its DLC are regarded, 3) the confusing service model, and 4) the problems arising from the emphasis on the online components of the game. Thus, the discussion touches not only DLC, but also related matters, such as the *Skate* franchise and the online service DLC is attached to.

5.1 Analyzing online discussions

To form a comprehension of the player reception I used secondary data analysis and field observations for data collection. Here, secondary data analysis refers to analyzing

discussion forum threads not originally intended for analysis by the originators (cf. Lin & Sun, 2011; for methodological discussion, see Carmichael, 2008, 392). Prior to the writing phase of the study, I spent a year and a half familiarizing myself with the general attitudes the console players harbor towards DLC on discussion boards and gaming news sites. The largest gaming related discussion boards were also regularly swept for more specific attitudes towards the *Skate* franchise. Additionally, I acquainted myself with two user created websites dedicated for the *Skate* games and the surrounding community. This observation period helped me to identify some of the themes that I would later study more thoroughly through the secondary data analysis. Thus, following connections to other sites in this kind of organic fashion, an online ethnographic approach is integrated into the analysis of this chapter.

The primary data in this chapter comprises of forum discussions on the NeoGAF forums (www.neogaf.com). NeoGAF is one of the largest, well known game related discussion forums on the Internet. It is a known site of social interaction between players and some of the more vocal game developers, and is regularly referenced on gaming related news sites. The most popular NeoGAF threads might receive up to 10 000 replies in a few days. The longest *Skate 3* related thread on NeoGAF called “Skate 3 – May 2010” received 1234 comments over a time period of 1,5 years. The commenting centered mainly around the announcement of *Skate 3* in September 2009, the release of the demo in April 2010, and on roughly a time period of 7 months after the game’s release in May 2010. Although new threads appeared over time, the first thread remained as NeoGAF’s “official” *Skate 3* thread for roughly a year and a half.

The online discussions were first followed on an occasional basis through most of the 2011, while the dominant part of the data collecting was done in the November of 2011. To find the threads, NeoGAF was Google searched for “skate 3” and “skate dlc”. As a result, eight threads centering on the *Skate* franchise and *Skate 3* were found and selected for the study. Incidentally, it was relatively difficult to find a forum thread centered on a particular element of a particular game. Instead of threads concerning *Skate 3* DLC, there would be threads concerning *Skate 3* in general with only isolated mentions on the DLC, or short threads on a particular *Skate 3* DLC pack where somebody would enquire whether or not to buy the said pack and subsequently receive simple ‘yes’ or ‘no’ answers. Nevertheless, the selected threads were explored for even passing remarks on related themes. Recurring themes such as DLC, online play, problems with online, EA,

and *Skate* franchise were especially kept an eye for. If relevant enough, single comments were evaluated too. Details regarding the selected NeoGAF threads are presented in Table 1.

Table 1. NeoGAF threads concerning Skate 3

| Thread name | Code | First post | Last post | Comments |
|---|-------------|-------------------|------------------|-----------------|
| <i>Skate 3 – May 2010</i> | T1 | 15. 9. 2009 | 29. 3. 2011 | 1234 |
| <i>Skate 3 announcement trailer</i> | T2 | 15. 9. 2009 | 2. 3. 2010 | 127 |
| <i>EA announces Skate 3 (PR)</i> | T3 | 19. 10. 2009 | 19. 10. 2009 | 32 |
| <i>Skate 3 Debut Trailer (yeah boiiiie)</i> | T4 | 6. 11. 2009 | 9. 11. 2009 | 92 |
| <i>Skate 3 After Dark Pack (Free)</i> | T5 | 30. 7. 2010 | 30. 7. 2010 | 10 |
| <i>Skate 2 or Skate 3?</i> | T6 | 17. 11. 2010 | 17. 11. 2010 | 28 |
| <i>Is EA's "Skate" franchise dead?</i> | T7 | 10. 3. 2011 | 11. 3. 2011 | 119 |
| <i>I feel cheated [Skate 3]</i> | T8 | 22. 3. 2012 | 22. 3. 2012 | 15 |

On forums like NeoGAF, gaming related news are regularly brought into highlight and used as starting points for discussion. Methodologically, the discussion forums are seen as a site for social interaction. Here players share links to previews and reviews, user generated videos (on sites like YouTube), and to official *Skate* sites such as the *Skate* blog (skate.ea.com/blog.action) and the *Skate* forums (<http://forum.ea.com/eaforum/categories/show/58.page>). Discussing the online ethnographic “place”, Hine reminds that the researcher should follow the connections that in each place (such as on a discussion forum) organically shape up to become meaningful (2000, 60). Thus, the primary data is supported by a more lightweight analysis of secondary sources, EA’s official *Skate* blog (skate.ea.com) and the two user generated sites (skatefluckit.com, likebuttermag.com), which are then used to elaborate some of the intricacies concerning *Skate 3* and the DLC model.

EA's official *Skate* blog was a place where many players trusted their voice to be heard by the developers. The blog was the place to announce new contests, features, and DLC. It was clearly meant to work as a tool for community building with the "street cool" series producer Chris "Cuz" Parry talking the language associated with the skateboarding subculture, weekly lifting up the most impressive user-made *Skate* videos and addressing these users directly. Here, many users would be directly asking Cuz questions, occasionally getting answered. The most popular posts on *Skate* blog gathered up to 100 comments (Table 2). The central identified theme in the commenting were the problems concerning the online part of the game service and the demands players had for updating the game. It is notable that, since anyone could comment the blog posts or create an account for the official forums, these sites gathered the majority of aggressive, overt criticism. Accordingly, these sites are analyzed keeping an eye on the matter and subsequently receive less weight among the sources.

Table 2. The posts on *Skate* blog

| Post name | Code | Date | Replies |
|--|-------------|-------------|----------------|
| "SKATE 3 in stores now!" | P1 | 11.5.2010 | 45 |
| "The reviews are in" | P2 | 12.5.2010 | 100 |
| "Winners, winners, winners..." | P3 | 14.5.2010 | 28 |
| "SKATE 3 questions online, Share Pack and Filmer Pack" | P4 | 17.5.2010 | 100 |
| "Guess who else likes to skate!" | P5 | 20.5.2010 | 37 |
| "Play with the SKATE 3 team on Xbox Live this Thursday!" | P6 | 25.5.2010 | 48 |
| "Overwhelming..." | P7 | 27.5.2010 | 56 |
| "SKATE 3 and Deadspace video contest" | P8 | 28.5.2010 | 100 |
| "the bobbybobbydigi solo" | P9 | 28.5.2010 | 32 |
| "The patch" | P10 | 2.6.2010 | 100 |
| "Skate 3 @ Venice Beach" | P11 | 3.6.2010 | 31 |
| "Malooof Money Cup DLC" | P12 | 8.6.2010 | 63 |
| "Pushing the envelope...." | P13 | 11.6.2010 | 34 |
| "Dr Pepper, Look Under The Cap!" | P14 | 15.6.2010 | 55 |
| "Business up front..." | P15 | 18.6.2010 | 78 |
| "'The Patch' Part Deux" | P16 | 25.6.2010 | 54 |

| | | | |
|---|-----|------------|-----|
| "Win a trip to the Maloof Money Cup OC!" | P17 | 30.6.2010 | 39 |
| "Tales From The Hawaiian DLC Skatepark" | P18 | 9.7.2010 | 41 |
| "One Copy At A Time..." | P19 | 16.7.2010 | 50 |
| "After Dark" | P20 | 23.7.2010 | 100 |
| "Patches" | P21 | 30.7.2010 | 80 |
| "It's Like That, And That's The Way It Is..." | P22 | 6.8.2010 | 53 |
| "No Cuz? No Problem..." | P23 | 13.8.2010 | 69 |
| "Good ol' DLC....and a new contest" | P24 | 20.8.2010 | 100 |
| "Long time no stupid blog, eh?" | P25 | 7.9.2010 | 33 |
| "The news is..." | P26 | 10.9.2010 | 46 |
| "Blog jacking..." | P27 | 17.9.2010 | 34 |
| "All hail Marraffa..." | P28 | 24.9.2010 | 52 |
| "Shees, there's no winning..." | P29 | 1.10.2010 | 68 |
| "It's going to be what you make it..." | P30 | 15.10.2010 | 100 |

The two user generated sites were found through EA forums after the discussion on the official forums had already seized, and random forum goers were guided by other users to the few remaining active *Skate* communities. Centered on user generated *Skate* videos (so called 'fake skate' videos), these sites are operated by a small number of hardcore fans, and still somewhat operational. While these sites are referenced only briefly, they nevertheless contribute to a wider understanding of the *Skate 3* community.

In order, the research process consisted of 1) going through all the NeoGAF threads and following the different trails to the official sites, user operated sites, and YouTube, 2) forming a comprehension of the recurring and relevant themes rising from the source sites, 3) dividing my analysis chapter into thematic subchapter based on this analysis, and 4) illustrating my analysis of the user reception with fitting thread excerpts. The identified themes rising from the data are: 1) **the release rate of *Skate* franchise**, 2) **the fragmented form of the game through DLC**, 3) **the problems with the game service**, and 4) **the problems arising from the emphasis on the online components**. While I use secondary data analysis as a data collecting method, the method of the analysis phase could be called illustrative reception study. Dominantly, the thread excerpts used in the text originate from NeoGAF and *Skate* blog comments. As much as possible, I try

to contextualize the used excerpts as parts of a wider discussion in order to give the reader an exact notion of how mainstream, widespread, or solitary these voices are.

Methodologically, a central problem was whether this kind of data would constitute as “good” ethnographic research. Following Meehan (2000), the study of media should use a combination of political economy and fan ethnography. For her, fan ethnography entails a mixture of textual analysis, informant interviews, personal experience, and participant observation (2000, 73). As my method consists of secondary data analysis, personal experience and expertise, the differences between participating observation and a more passive approach are briefly discussed in the following.

The earlier online ethnographies have not seen any problem treating relatively interactive exchanges such as MUDs, IRC, and forum posts as legitimate targets for ethnographic study (Hine, 2000, 51; Baym, 1995). While a more in-depth online ethnography utilizing ‘participating observation’ might have served this study better, the discussion revolving around *Skate 3* had already withered towards the end of 2011 when the data for this study was collected. Thus, I decided to concentrate on collecting and analyzing existing discussions on the chosen forums.

Though passive data collecting from online environments might seem easy, Hine reminds that many researchers have found a more active role to be more fruitful (2008, 257). Additionally, harvesting long discussion threads in one visit after the thread has already become quiet misses the experience of ‘real time’ even asynchronous forums provide, that is, feeling the rhythm and speed of changing activity levels on the site. Further, without participating in the ongoing discussion the researcher loses the possibility of receiving (possibly fruitful) private contacts from other users. (ibid., 262-263)

Still, as Paccagnella (1997) suggests, through covert observation online settings can be studied in their undisturbed state. Collecting and studying user opinions, not by provoking them but collecting them as they appear, lets us know how relevant and topical opinions towards DLC are. Since DLC appears as a popular target for overt criticism and ‘trolling’, researcher asking directly about the subject might easily end up with a distorted view – even the very presence of the researcher might be enough (ibid.). To counter Hine’s criticism, the rhythm of the discussion can be evaluated through the time stamps of messages. Following Cole et al. (2008, 365), the data readily available on discussion forums is also much larger and more complex, than a researcher could hope

to assemble on her own. A data originating from an earlier period can also tell us more accurately of that period (ibid., 366) – important to notice in the rapidly evolving techno-economy of digital games. Secondary data analysis is also more transparent, as other researchers can cross-examine the data sources used (ibid.; Carmichael, 2008, 385).

Regarding the sources used here, it is important to remember that this data can be seen comprising of *fans* of the game. Meehan (2000, 72) describes fans to be the “most active of active audiences”, referring to fans’ tendency to cultural participation (see also Jenkins, 2006). In the case of *Skate 3* and NeoGAF, the term should not be seen referring so much to productivity than to lack of criticism of certain degree. These are mainly players who appreciate – even love – the game even when the developer decisions significantly frustrate them. For many users, the game, despite its shortcomings, is their primary hobby. They offer views on what directions the game series should evolve to. They share pro-tips with each other and generally want to take part in the community by discussing the game. The more casual forum goers, meanwhile, are there mainly to ask something specific about the game before they make a purchase decision.

Here, it is important to maintain a critical eye and watch out for too positive portrayals. Lacking from the forum discussion are the more refined critical voices, as most criticism is directed towards matters of taste, like should there be an open world or not, or what is the right level of realism. Obviously, the discussion comprises only of the voices that are active enough to post on forums. Analyzing forum discussions without additional methods, such as participating observation, we are left to speculate what are the “lazy opinions”. Still, we have to remember that “lurking” fans do read these discussions even if they do not participate. Most of them could participate should they feel compelled to. Nonetheless, this reception study is considered to focus on the most active and sociable *Skate 3* fandom only.

5.2 Before launch: more *Skate*?

Skate 3 was announced on 15th of September 2009, less than eight months after the release of *Skate 2* and two years after the first *Skate*. Here, it is relevant to point out that *Skate 3* was already the third main installment in the series within the same console generation. Among other things the initial marketing highlighted *Skate 3*’s stronger focus on online-multiplayer, the new skate.Create editor mode, the pre-order DLC ‘Black

Box Distribution Park', new skate moves such as the "darkslide", and the new hardcore mode.

Right after the announcement trailer two threads were created on NeoGAF. In the first one ("Skate 3 – May 2010") the pre-launch commenting concentrated on the enthusiasm over the new hardcore mode, as most everyone felt that it was sorely lacking from *Skate 2*. On the other thread ("Skate 3 announcement trailer"), however, the majority of commenting centered on whether or not the *Skate* series was receiving a new installment too soon. Many of the commenters who felt the new game was coming out too soon pointed out the fact that *Skate 2* had come out only eight months ago. The opinion here was that yet another new installment in the series threatens to "wear the franchise out", or as Nieborg (2006) puts it, exhaust the franchise:

Xav: Already?

JustAnotherOtaku: That's what I was thinking. Is it just me or didn't EA say they didn't plan on turning the franchise into Tony Hawk? 2 games in a year and a bit and the inclusion of more gimmicky tricks means that IMO anyway, this is the way the series is headed :(Board peripheral for skate 4? Would much prefer a load of DLC (more spots/skaters/clothes/boards/tricks etc) for Skate 2 than yet another sequel.

Returners: no! While I do love me some Skate, I don't want this to be yearly franchise. Darkslide FTW!

Flipyap: Yikes. Too soon. I haven't even picked up Skate 2 and it feels like it's coming out too soon. Think I need a demo as good as the original one to sell me on another Skate. [T2]

In the comments, the *Tony Hawk Pro Skater* series was brought up as a comparison point, presenting a negative example of too fast release schedule. Generally, *THPS* is considered to be a game series damaged by too many installments, drained to death by overt serialization. Accordingly, NeoGAF commenters were using phrases like "turn the franchise into *THPS*" (T2) and "franchise burnout" (T3) but also much more negative and descriptive phrases like "EA is wearing this whore out. Too early. Don't Tony Hawk this great franchise" (T2). User 'peterb0y' (T3): "[I] thought SKATE's "thing" was that the devs said it wasn't gonna be whored out like Tony Hawk games. Oh well." The commenting implied that the *Skate* franchise not only meant a lot to the gamers, but needed to be treated "right". Of interest is also the fact how EA and the developer were

brought up in a manner that implied familiarity and a conversational connection between the company and the players. I will return to this matter in the next chapter.

The pre-launch commenting also brought up the alternative of introducing the new content as DLC for the earlier games. User ‘Brobzoid’ (T2) highlighted the fact that the new content seems to be just a cosmetic improvement, and continued: “Skate would have been so awesome if they had built it as a platform for DLC instead of this yearly milk bullshit. Just give me new environments, more tricks and a bug fix here and there, I don't need a whole new game.” The developer was thus accused of using DLC in a wrong way, or at least not taking advantage of its full potential. For these players, EA should have been updating the original game regularly, rather than start anew every year. “With a whole new game I have to leave behind all the cool spots I liked in the previous game”, ‘Brobzoid’ (T2) added. Significantly, some users brought up EA’s own *Burnout Paradise* as a model for doing things differently. “I hope that next time they do a Skate Paradise and do the Burnout model, with DLC instead of another disc”, user ‘Vinterbird’ (T2) argued, nodding to the heavily updated – and celebrated – racing game.

Besides criticism, there were also many users who were welcoming the new content wholeheartedly: “I've played Skate 2 everyday since it came out (same with Skate 1) so I'm definitely ready for some new shit,” user ‘Dandy’ (T2) proclaimed, whereas user ‘POWERSPHERE’ (T2) felt that, while “some more substantial Skate 2 DLC” would be nice, “this is even better”. The opinion here seemed to be that any new content is good – the more, the better. Likewise, many commenters were dismissing the accusations over the release schedule being too rapid, countering that there would be 16 months between *Skate 2* and *Skate 3*, just as there had been between *Skate* and *Skate 2*. Many of the same people added that the series seemed to be getting significantly improved with every installment:

Skiesofwonder: This is where developers go wrong. Releasing two games in a series per gen is kinda pushing it... but fine. But 3? Come on now, isn't that milking it a bit? And is this really going to warrant \$60 for the third time? Mostly likely not for anybody that isn't a hardcore gamer.

This is how you kill good franchises.

Najaf: Really? Well lets see; they are building a completely new world (unlike 2 which remodeled large portions of the original San Van), adding a skate park editor, revamping the created content editor and capabilities, adding to the trick list (underflips, darkslides, etc) but keeping the right stick uncluttered, as well as encouraging team skating and filming (online).

The simple addition of a skatepark editor will warrant a purchase. Every great park and spot in the world will be created by the community. Want to skate the OG Berrics? LOVE park? Woodward? Want to create the elementary school 5 stair you broke your arm on back in the day? The value prospect of this alone is unbelievable. The rating system will ensure that the quality parks are pushed up into the spotlight. Its an easy sell for any fan of the series. [T1]

Importantly, in a later comment ‘Najaf’ also pointed out that:

if Microsoft had followed the same time line for releasing the next Xbox as they did the 360, Skate 3 would be on the next system. The Xbox 360 is enjoying a much longer lifespan than its predecessor. Thus, the amount of titles per generation in a series will expand across the board. [T1]

Some commenters, like ‘AZ Greg’ (T2), were more moderate, adopting a let’s-wait-and-see attitude, while adding that “I won’t be crying ‘too soon’ until the quality of the games are [sic] obviously suffering due to the 16 month release cycle.” Interestingly, in defending the fast release schedule, *Skate* series was compared to other game series released even more rapidly. “Crying about a 16 month gap between games? :lol I hope you guys aren’t getting L4D2, Madden or NHL 10, etc. since ya know, those are yearly sequels, releasing 12 months from their predecessors”, ‘The Skater’ (T2) ironically remarked. The comment highlights how completely EA has been able to establish the yearly sequel model and how some users see the consecutive sequels entirely expected. Analyzing gaming site rhetoric, Nieborg (2006) argues that the franchise is utterly ubiquitous to the gaming culture. According to him, sequels and the continuation of the franchise are now seen as inevitable (ibid). This applies now also to DLC: it is wholly expected. User ‘omg rite’ (T4): “Sorry, roster updates are not worth a new yearly \$60 game in the age of DLC (or even before that) anymore than it’s worth releasing a new skateboarding game every year and a half.”

Still, some users do not see this possibility. User ‘BigKaboom2’ (T2) made a comment over correcting some of the problems in *Skate 2*: “Skate 2 came out 16 months after Skate 1 - I don’t understand what’s so surprising about this or why anyone would not

like them to fix the frame rate drops in career mode [...] and allow moveable objects online, for example.” What the comment suggested was that in the usual fashion *Skate 3* would fix some of the technical problems of *Skate 2*. Interestingly, and as a counterpoint to the *Burnout* model, the commenter did not suggest – or perhaps even think about the fact – that the updates could be delivered in the form of DLC.

5.3 After launch: extended or exhausted?

As discussed, already at the end 1970s entertainment industry took notice of the ways skateboard culture could be commoditized. As skate parks were seen as huge business opportunities, commercial entities tried to respond to the wishes of the skaters by trying to build better and better skate parks – though not always incorporating actual skaters to the design loop. Here, magazines like *SkateBoarder* acted as a shared ground of the cultural development for both skaters and investors alike. (Borden, 2001) In many ways the situation with the current digital game culture mirrors this dynamic. The DLC model presents conversational possibilities: players have the opportunity to be vocal about their needs on discussion forums, and DLC indeed can be seen to be a very fitting tool for the developer to address these wishes. The opinions and attitudes concerning the DLC model vary, however. On one hand new brands, equipment, and skate culture characters are both warmly welcomed and expected additions. On the other, there are those who repeatedly oppose and criticize DLC for various reasons.

5.3.1 The negotiable DLC

After the launch of *Skate 3* on May 11th the NeoGAF thread (T1) was mostly filled with posts discussing issues such as frame rate, PS3 versus Xbox360, how to do specific tricks, and the general feel of the game compared to the earlier *Skate* games. For the most parts, the reception was quite enthusiastic and positive, and particularly the hardcore mode was praised. Soon, however, the discussion started to revolve around various, small online problems. During the first couple of days a lot of people were experiencing multiple complications with connecting to servers and uploading content, exemplified by the following exchange:

nocode: This EA server problem bullshit is really getting old. The game is a week old, what the fuck are they doing? They make online teams the focus of the game, and it's broken for the first week (at least the first week, who knows when it will be fixed)

bistromathics: looks like lots of other people are having the same "problem connecting to ea online service" as me...but what gives for the people that are making teams and whatnot? is it just up and down for everyone or is it working for some and not others?

edit: up and down for all i guess...just worked when i tried again

Tunesmith: Yeah it's a bit up and down, tends to work for me after 1-2 tries. Rather terrible nonetheless, shame EA. [T1]

Soon after, the 'Filmer Pack', a first day DLC, was pulled from the marketplace because of too many bugs. Meanwhile, on the official blog, the developers had already started talking about new DLC content, 'Maloo Money Cup'. As a result, many commenters felt this to be distasteful, as the game had so many issues to patch. "So there's DLC coming out for this game on the 8th, but there hasn't been a patch. The online never works, and basic parts of the game are broken, but there's paid DLC coming out? C'mon now Black Box, get your priorities straight", 'cann3dheat' (T1) moaned, while on the *Skate* blog 'beckmarley623' (P12) thought that "[B]efore they start putting out dlc, they should really fix their game first. i get kicked off nonstop all day or freeze, whichever happens first. it really blows." By now, a week after the launch, the blog replies were littered with angry replies demanding Black Box to fix the online service.

At the same time, the players who had familiarized themselves with the game started to come up with needs and wishes for new features. On the *Skate* blog replies users were actively trying to suggest content they would like to see introduced to the game. Many real life skateparks, such as The Berrics and Burnside, were repeatedly suggested for future DLC packs, whereas some users came up with more elaborate lists:

snaps-13: any chance of getting some better apparel options guys?

for example, being able to wear a cap under a hood or hair under either. maybe you might be able to give us colour way options on shoes or just better cloths, bandana's or better jackets, cut off jeans or shirt sleeves, we dont all dress like 12 year olds.
would be happy to pay for this as a game add on.

tkoga99: yeah like snaps-13 more customizable clothes option for free or add-on?

-customizable bandanas

-customizable cutoff jeans

-being able to choose a shirt then wear it under a select jacket

-definitely fix the lag in the Create-a-Park

- thanks for working on the merge
- a tool to choose how many stairs we want in Create-a-Park
- definitely a colour way for all customizables and Create-a-Park
- safer connection to ea server (thank you)
- maybe a add-on where we can buy more enviornments for Create-a-Park
- fix the sunlight thing in Create-a-Park
- free filmer pack (or REALLY cheap)
- the ability to have as much terrain and props as we want in Create-a-Park
- party play, where we can free skate in two different screens like tony hawk
- a game add-on for real life spots and park (VENICE BEACH)!
- bein able to tie a bandana anywhere or being able to tilt a hat anyway
- and one last game add-on for all previous maps and DLC in the pas t [P10]

Besides the many wishes presented here, it is notable how the commenters are already suggesting paid add-ons and a marketplace-like system through which players could buy create-a-park pieces, signaling how the paid DLC model has taken root in the gamer community.

Immediately after the launch, many players were complaining about the removal of party play from *Skate 3*, basically the only local multiplayer mode in the earlier games. ‘Hashandtrash’ (P10): [I] have one question where the is party play? if youve taken it out im completely lost. that was one of the sickest bits of skate. chillin on the sofa bailing against your mates. why would you ever think of getting rid of that??. “[C]an we at least get an info on offline party play? I mean a yes, a no, a maybe, a why, anything!”, ‘Poulpe38000’ (P10) continued. After more angry replies on the blog, a petition thread was created on *Skate* forums by the user ‘Citles’. The thread was soon 15 pages long.⁷ Many users brought up the fact that now the only way to play locally together was through multiple consoles. ‘T1T-E-Bishop’: “[I]t sucks knowing unless we buy another ps3 that we don't need, we will never be able to play together. i thought the point of games was to play with your friends? what if they're your roommates? no cigar?”⁸

⁷ <http://forum.ea.com/eaforum/posts/list/533562.page>

⁸ <http://forum.ea.com/eaforum/posts/list/60/533562.page>

Besides players signing the cause, the thread gathered a lot of discussion on whether these kinds of unofficial petitions had any effect on the development team. Users were bringing up similar instances – for example with Activision-Blizzard – where petitioning had not worked. User ‘GenetiX Crysis’: “80 people [is] nothing, you would need a few thouasnd [sic] unique signatures rather than one person creating new accounts. Cuz and the devs would laugh their * off seeing you pathetic morons try to create new accounts and pretend it's an official signature.” Additionally, many commenters, such as ‘Cit1es’, were accused of generating posts through multiple accounts.

Cahken: [...] My account was created 2 days ago. The reason there are so many new accounts is because this is an issue people actually care about.

Cahken: And I'm sure Cuz and the developers are intelligent enough to understand how statistics work. For every 1 person that feels this way and bothers to sign up and post in this forum, there are statistically probably 100 other people who feel the same way, but either can't be bothered to make an account, or haven't even been on this website and don't think that their voices will be heard. It's all about representatives.

What would they really lose from adding this as DLC anyway? I don't know why they would ignore us if they know that they can only benefit from listening to us and taking action. They'll be the ones gaining money, once again.⁹

‘Cit1es’, however, would not stop, relentlessly posting on both the petition thread and the official blog, gaining others behind him:

Cit1es: cuz can post about the maloof DLC and answer those 2 page questions but they all ignore the fact we want party play back 15 pages! 15 pages of signatures and they dont even act like this thread exists... what a joke... clearly we want party play back. dlc. dlc dlc. at least man up and answer the COMMUNITY if you guys actually give a shiRt¹⁰

Many who signed the petition wished that party play would not become a paid DLC, but instead a free update, as the feature had been a part of the core game in the previous installments. Others, however – acknowledging that creating DLC packs was not free –

⁹ <http://forum.ea.com/eaforum/posts/list/75/533562.page>

¹⁰ <http://forum.ea.com/eaforum/posts/list/225/533562.page>

were already suggesting how much they would pay for the feature. “[I]f they dont announce this feature is coming back in as DLC within the next few days im returning it”¹¹, ‘daffo’ threatened, already expecting DLC over a free update. The community was clearly divided over the issue, some accepting to pay for the extra work, while others seeing free DLC as a way for apologizing the numerous online problems hampering the game.

For a long time, it seemed that no response from EA/Black Box was going to emerge. But eventually, over a month later, in the end of June, the official blog announced the team was looking into the matter. At this point – after the feud on the EA forums and a few blog posts describing the extra work that would go in to implementing the feature – it was clear to most players that the party play would be a paid DLC instead of a free update. On September 21th, over four months from the launch, the party play feature was released in the last *Skate 3* DLC, ‘San Van Party Pack’.

When the DLC packs started to get released, some fared better than the others. Especially ‘Malooof Money Cup 2010’ was attacked rather harshly:

RhymeStarZ: I thought the first Money cup was BARE. This one takes the cake. One huge world and nothing to do in it. Way to get 4.99 and not have to put in any work. The level is huge and has almost nothing in it. Unless you enjoy tricking on flat open spaces. NOT WORTH THE 4.99

Sk8erdude82: I guess the DLC was worth it... but theres the park and then... nothing. Its like why was this here in the first place?

MdeCerteau: enough with this garbage, fix the game already...

Lawrence83: \$5! ... Off! Produce a good game first then worry about DLC.

[anonymous 1]: WE DEMAND FREE CONTENT. AND CONTENT OF VALUE. FREE FILMER PACK. MORE CLOTHES. SOMETHING. EA, BLACKBOX AND WHO EVER ELSE WAS INVOLVED WITH THIS GAME HAVE PISSED OFF A TON OF FANS. YOU OWE US SOMETHING.

¹¹ <http://forum.ea.com/eaforum/posts/list/30/533562.page>

[anonymous 2]: hey EA, i really hope your reading all of our comments, we all obviously want better content, maybe new clothes, new parks, better flimer packs, pretty much any GOOD free content will make all of us die-hard fans happy, please consider it.

beckmarley623: i agree with everyone on here, more FREE dlc , better clothes options, a night level would be great. also more parks to edit. [P12]

Though night levels were never the most requested feature, ‘After Dark’ DLC, a free update for everybody who had activated the ‘Skate Share’ voucher code, would later introduce nighttime skating. When ‘After Dark’ was announced, vast majority of the blog commenters seemed to be very happy, even genuinely surprised about the pack being free – so much so that all the bad feelings seemed to have gone away:

[anonymous]: free... all i can say is i'm shocked... but thank you guys very much, looks tight. thanks again BB at last something for true fans

allreck: This is why you will be game legends for years to come. The game is amazing and thank you for taking the time to continue to add dlc to the game. To me it shows you care more about the fans then the money. Keep up the amazing work and yall have a fan for life!

Locs13: Yeah man thats awesome also i think you should bring back all the DLC's from SKATE 2 like the community center and the school you no all that good stuff. [P20]

Those who had not bought the game new and subsequently had not received the voucher code were obviously not as thrilled. “Nice but I wish it was the real kind of free, since I’ll be borrowing this from my local library”, ‘Neuromancer’ (T5) complained. “I don’t like the way DLC is going anymore. Soon we’ll have to input a code just to play the game“, ‘Stabby McSter’ (T5) added, whereas ‘rhfb’ (T5) proclaimed that “the game should have included dynamic day/night cycle from the start, but I guess this will do.” Together with the comment by ‘Locs13’, above, this comment highlights the somewhat typical player reaction towards *Skate 3* DLC on the *Skate* blog: whatever the players are offered, the situation could always be even better. Like ‘Locs13’, many others both on NeoGAF and on blog comments felt that the environments in *Skate* and *Skate 2* were balanced better than the ones in *Skate 3* and were wishing for the old environments to be reintroduced – perhaps because environments from the first *Skate* had been introduced to *Skate 2* in a DLC pack. Finally, both ‘After Dark’ and ‘San Van Party Pack’ answered these wishes by introducing sizeable areas from the earlier games.

Overall, based on just the *Skate* blog and attuning to the excessive criticism, many of the larger *Skate 3* DLC packs – ‘Danny Way’, ‘San Van’, and the free ‘After Dark’ – were welcomed and applauded. It is clear that, overwhelmingly, the players appreciate additional content – if and when the DLC packs are free or offer a substantial addition to the game.

5.3.2 The chopped product

One of the most usual criticism players have about DLC is that they are being charged unfairly for content they have already paid for. For many, the problem is in the way game experience is sold in several transactions. The NeoGAF thread “I feel cheated [Skate 3]” (T8) was created solely to lament the fact that in order to get the full game experience, the player had to buy ‘San Van Party Pack’ for local multiplayer and ‘Skate Share Pack’ for online multiplayer and user created content. As ‘heshfield’ (P23) put it:

copy of the game: \$60...check
filmer pack: \$10...check
Maloof DLC: \$5...check
Hawaiian Dream DLC: \$5..check
New skate.create DLC: 7\$...
Ability to upload HQ replays consistently without failure: ...zilch
Someone who had to buy the skate.share pack has spent almost \$100 on this game alone.
Where does it end??? [P23]

The problems seem to arise when players start to feel content is being held back. The question turns to why was the content not released with the main game? The suspicion seems to be that DLC is content cut from the main game aiming to sell the game in small pieces for a greater profit. User ‘PETARD UK’ on the party play petition thread:

[Y]ou would pay 400-800 points for something that would have taken literally zero effort on their part? if anything they would have had to make the effort to REMOVE it! not to be a * but it's people like you who will pay money for anything who are the reason developers think they can release half a game for 40 quid and sell us the rest for ms points (think assassins creed 2 COMPLETE edition... what cocky money grabbing bastards... they are

incapable of finishing the game before release so they sell you the rest of it as and when they actually finish it).¹²

While on NeoGAF:

Brobzoid: Played the game today. Was a huge disappointment to see that they'd taken local multiplayer out completely. [...] Like why take out off line multi-player? Did it dilute the experience or some other PR bullshit? It's not about having the time to do it either as it was already there [in *Skate 2*] and all they had to do was pick some spots for the spot battle, and they could have copied and pasted from the single player for that like the previous games, no problem. [T1]

This feeling is not helped by the fact that increasingly often games like *Skate 3* have DLC packs on sale already on the launch day. Moreover, based on a yearly real-life skate event, the *Skate 3* DLC 'Maloo Money Cup 2010' appeared already in *Skate 2* (without the year suffix). This led to protests, as some players felt that they should not be charged the "entry fee" twice, but instead receive the DLC for free since they bought it already the first time around. Further, besides the 'Maloo' DLC, *Skate 2* also had the familiar sounding 'San Van Classic Pack' (introduces areas from the first *Skate*), 'Time Is Money' pack, and 'Filmer Pack'. In this light the gamers getting annoyed becomes that more understandable:

Zoso: I expect no less from EA. The DLC was probably finished when the game was. They could have included it in *Skate 3* as the Maloo Money Cup, but instead they gave us last year's course that I already paid money for in *Skate 2* :lol Plus charging for another filmer pack and having DLC that beats the game for you is just ridiculously stupid. [...] [T1]

Examining player opinions towards digital distribution, Toivonen and Sotamaa (2010) describe why players would favor digital marketplaces. In short, among the most common reasons were wide selection of games, fast and easy usability (including the payment transactions), and affordability. On the other hand, the recent EEDAR study highlights how only 11% of the respondents names the low quality of DLC as a reason for not buying. Thus I am inclined to lean towards the results by Toivonen and Sotamaa:

¹² <http://forum.ea.com/eaforum/posts/list/533562.page>

with DLC too, the price and the easiness of use are the central facets of a pleasant customer experience.

Another instance where the DLC model seems create two opposing camps, is when any story content of a story driven game is spread among the main game and the DLC packs. Although *Skate 3* is not in any way a game centered on story, it too seemed to suffer from the game *experience* being chopped to several pieces. As the comments above illustrate, users get frustrated when they need to buy several DLC packs in order to feel they are getting the complete game, be it because of getting all the achievements or some other reason. EA's popular *Mass Effect* series, for example, openly uses DLC packs to bridge the story between main installments. Perhaps familiar to many from TV, this kind of a serialization practice clearly seems to clash with the sensibilities that some players traditionally connect with game development. Here DLC shows itself, not as an endless pool of possibilities, but as a disruptive annoyance, dividing what used to be whole. Hamari and Lehdonvirta (2010) have written about how in the context of virtual good sales marketing should be unobtrusively integrated with game design. With DLC the situation is the same. Rather than blatantly chopping games into pieces and selling them in parts for greater profit, DLC should be better tied to a fitting context the same way that many free-to-play games are doing.

Yet another way in which the modern game service clashes with traditional players is offering options for casual gamers. The 'Time is Money' DLC unlocks all locations, skaters, gear, and Skate.Park objects that could otherwise be earned by playing through *Skate 3's* career and online modes. While convenient to casual gamers with little time to spare, the function of this DLC can also be seen very differently: "So, basically, you're paying for access to content that's already in the game. Or, to put it another way, you're paying five bucks for a cheat code", a journalist on Joystiq.com sarcastically remarked (Nelson, 2009).

Furthermore, criticism has risen over the fact that some of the items sold on online marketplaces are not downloadable content at all, but rather content keys, used to unlock content already on the game disk. User 'sniperayanami80' (P14): "I remember when you bought a game and didn't have to buy ancillary crap to get something that's already on the damn disc! I miss buying 8-bit NES cartridges because guess what, you got the whole ... game!" Toivonen and Sotamaa (2010) have described how it is surprisingly

important for many gamers to feel concrete ownership over their games. It seems that this feeling of ownership, already diminished by the absence of a physical game copy, is in danger of vanishing completely if the player cannot actually see the DLC pack being downloaded from a server.

5.4 A product or a service?

The overwhelming popularity of various app stores has started to slowly change the consumer habits, and paying through online transactions has become more and more common (Sotamaa et al., 2011). One of the emerging problems, however, is that the immaterial nature of virtual commodities combined with the new service models makes it sometimes hard to see what is actually being bought. My analysis has covered so far ancillary costs, gamers feeling that content is held back, and content keys instead of actual content. The question arising from this argument is whether there exists a discrepancy between the “traditional” gamers and the modern notion of turning a product into a profitable service.

The transition from a more traditional game product to a game service not only creates antipathy, but also confusion as to how these services actually work. In the modern console environment with multiple user accounts and service agreements, questions such as do the user rights apply to other users on the same console become relevant. Examining the NeoGAF threads and the *Skate* blog discussion, it becomes clear how some players’ seem to be unaware how the DLC system works:

UrbanRats: [...] So here on GAF you guys said that the online pass only work for ONE user on the console, well, i was so pissed that i went to complain on the EA websites (in my subconscious, i was hoping you were wrong :lol) and in the Online Pass' FAQ section i read:

Quote: 'Do I need an unique Online Pass for every user on my console?'

No. One Online Pass will give online access to multiple users logged into the console where the Online Pass was first activated (subject to the console manufacturer's and EA online terms of service).

Also, the user that activated the Online Pass will be allowed to access online features on other consoles (of the same manufacturer) by logging into the same account credentials that they used when they enabled the Online Pass.'

So I open a question on the SKATE3 board on GameFAQs and the answer is:

Quote: 'I have the PS3 version, so I dunno how different it is on 360 as far as accounts go, but the code I got works for ONLY my online ID and not my wife's'

WTF?!

Could it be anymore contort?

I want the game badly, but that would be a deal breaker for me. I can't buy a game that my brothers won't be able to fully play. :(

Pandoracell: I'll try for you. Give me a couple of hours.

UrbanRats: I love you man <3.

Pandoracell: I just checked, the content only works on the account it was activated on. Sorry dude. [T1]

However, on the author's console, at least, the DLC works for all users. Besides this, trouble arises also from the fact that companies like EA and the player community operates in a global marketplace: the *Skate 3* Dr. Pepper promotion proved to be available only for US gamers, meaning that the players could sign up for the promotion only with an US address. To make matters more confusing, the associated code bottles were, in fact, sold in Canada too. Even worse, while the Dr. Pepper items could be seen in the PS3 editor menu, the promotion codes were actually applicable only on Xbox 360. "This is a joke, I bought the time is money pack thinking it would unlock all the Dr. Pepper crap that was locked in-game. Now I find out I have to go buy more Dr. Pepper? This is a joke and the fact that you guys sale a pack to unlock everything, and it doesn't, sounds like a legal issue [...]" user 'Batman420AlldaY' (P14) complained, illustrating yet another problem the fragmented product spawns, as it gets more complex. Not surprisingly, all of these matters were widely asked about by the players on several FAQ pages and forums.

Thus, it becomes clear that the service environment not only confuses players, but also forces players to gather information about the game and the service around it before committing to buy a game. This, then, is a significant transition from the old, paid-upfront product model. A central question here is how aware the gamers are about this transition. Here, the expanded roles of the "three circuit model" by Kline et al. (Chapter 4.1) become relevant again: gamers are not only seen as players, but also users and consumers. Moreover, they more and more required to act in these expanded roles, exhibit-

ing increasing “reading” skills to navigate the gaming experience. Palmer (2003) suggests that participation in many forms of new media is becoming an obligation. With DLC, this participation means not only the need to actively complete the digital game experience with additional packages, but also the necessity of learning to traverse the various complexities of the expanded user system.

It seems that increasingly often, instead of buying a product, gamers are in fact being sold a service. Before connecting to an online service, most contemporary games require the players to agree to an end-user license agreement (EULA), at this point basically turning the game product into a mere license key to a service. Not limited to MMOs and free-to-play games anymore, some console games are now implementing a form of constant service, where the user has to check in to a game server before or even during a single player game. For example, in EA’s *Dragon Age 2* (2011) the DLC packs the user buys are linked to the mandatory EA Account. In order to play the DLC, the user must sign in to his or her dedicated account. When one user was banned from the EA forums, his EA Account was made unavailable which, in turn, resulted in him being incapable of playing the single player campaign of the game in the privacy of his home (Juba, 2011). The user outcry that ensued after the incident seemed to stem from the fact that users dominantly see games as products – not as services, for which the physical copy is only the access key to.

Showcased by *Skate 3*, it seems that the service is pressured on players through “must-have” DLC packs and then enforced with the online components. By placing the online components on a DLC pack – ‘Skate Share Pack’ in *Skate 3* – players are coaxed to go online in order to initiate in the service relationship. While the publisher cannot require gamers to agree to an EULA in a retail store, the service agreement is instead made optional by utilizing DLC. Only, for many players the DLC pack containing the online components is not regarded as optional, but as a must-have, as nothing else enables the community play, often the most popular game mode. While many players choose to go along with the agreement, they are not happy about it: “[...] You guys thought if you didnt allow any local multiplayer and forced the gamers to all have copies to play online you would sell more copies of the game. But it worked in reverse [...], everyone is returning the game because it doesnt have party play and nobody can play with their friends in the same room [...]”, ‘Super Funguy’ (P24) threatened, while ‘tannerdanner’ bursted:

[Y]ou know what sucks is i don't want to buy the dlc so i don't. but in turn i can't download parks people make with this new garbage in it. and generally all the skate heads make good parks regardless but that still keeps me from skating new parks. so stop acting like people are not forced to buy these dlcs when in reality if you want to use the game to its full capacity you DO have to buy all that bullshit. [P24]

This trend of incorporating the online multiplayer onto a DLC is now widely known as ‘online pass’ and implemented by EA in majority of its games. As with *Skate 3* these online passes are usually included with new game copies. While the practice is mostly explained by the need to diminish the used games sales, the marketing imperative of creating a service around the game is the other central reason. This, in turn, has lead critics to point out several possible problems. Among these is the fact that some of the voucher codes actually expire in time – a problem EA openly admits (Conditt, 2011). When asked about the matter by the gaming site Joystiq.com, EA answered that in these cases players are able to ask for new code for free. Still, as no official announcement has been made on the matter, some players might not be aware of this kind of possibility. Again, the service mentality automatically expects the players to gather information on how the DLC system works.

5.5 The problem with online

Since the online component is now regularly required in order to collect all the pieces of the game experience – at least the community play –, another, obvious problem raises its head: not everyone has the possibility to go online to begin with. Despite the overabundance of various online services, many people still do not own a network connection. Online connection might cost too much or not be available at all; gamers might not be allowed to go online to due to young age or not have an access to a credit card. Even if the one-time-use voucher code did not require the user to use a credit card, buying a used copy and “completing” it with an online pass does. The recent EEDAR report highlights other problems, too. For the 49% of the respondents who had never bought DLC, *privacy* was the single biggest concern (47%). Many people simply do not trust digital marketplaces enough to input their credit card number into an online service. (The EEDAR report does highlight the fact, however, that the recent PlayStation Network crisis did not lower the consumer trust in any significant way.) (EEDAR, 2011)

Furthermore, as modern console games start to implement more and more online components, the developer (or in most cases the publisher) is required to uphold the game servers. Because maintaining servers is not free, it is more than likely that at some point, when the user base has shrunk small enough, the publisher chooses to close down the service. Even before launch, gamers waiting for *Skate 3* were anticipating some kind of problems:

Najaf: The addition of the park editor in 3 might be something to consider though. The skate community will surely turn out some real gems in that and add virtually unlimited replayability. Just some food for thought.

Wolfmat: ...as long as the servers still run. Don 't forget it's EA, the killer of old online servers. The game should really support some external means of getting parks from creator to consumer.[T1]

Similarly on *Skate* blog:

ESS3NC3 0F 3V1L: [H]ow long before you guys decide to kill the servers on this game? Maybe after six months from now when no one is playing this your just gonna kill the online and make the gamerscore impossible for everyone who buys it afterwards. Oh but I bet you will still charge ten dollars to play the game online even though the servers are no longer up. [P4]

Indeed, roughly after a year and a half, in the fall 2011, it seemed that the online portion of *Skate 3* had begun to break down for the vast majority of the *Skate* community. Virtually everyone was having difficulties with connecting to online play sessions, accessing uploaded videos, and exporting custom graphics from the online graphics creator to the game. Of a special interest was the fact that the 'Filmer Pack' seemed to have ceased working completely, and many users were complaining that their 'Filmer Packs' had altogether vanished from their game. While the dysfunctional pack was subsequently removed from the PSN Store, it is still purchasable through the in-game menu of *Skate 3* (as of 21.3.2012) at the same time being the most expensive DLC pack on sale for the game.

As they have effectively crippled the player community around the game, these problems were, and still are the most central discussion topic on various forum threads concerning *Skate 3* (SkateFluckIt.com, LikeButterMag.com). While there have been some temporary fixes, the most prevalent problems still remain and have made the player

community many times plea for help from EA at the official forums. Notably, in December 2010 John Ritticiello, the CEO of EA, made the announcement that *Skate* franchise would not be getting any more games or DLC: “At least for the excitement out there, skateboarding seems to have run its course as the representative example in [the broader action sports] genre” (Totilo, 2010). In the spring of 2011 EA announced the disbanding of the *Skate* development team, Black Box. Even after this, some of the forum goers were able to keep in touch with the ex-producer Chris “Cuz” Parry. Parry was sorry for all the problems and let the players know that, although not working on the series any more, he had made some efforts to get the appropriate EA people to fix the situation. Soon even this ended, after which no solution, neither an explanation of the situation, aside from the occasional temporary fix, has been offered to the player community by EA. For the most part, it seemed that few EA/Black Box employees besides the mostly silent forum moderator ‘EA_AgentX’ were anymore working on the game. Some users were pleading EA to do something, while others were furious:

EA Berrics: You guys at EA are a joke, servers almost completely stopped working for no reason, you didnt even kept us in formed why, and a customer who has nothing to do with the actual team had to specifically adress the issue while you guys are the ones supposed to be the ones WORKING on these type of things.

As for today, EA hasnt yet given a reason why the servers have been completely messed up since August 11th, and you haven't either told us if you plan on doing anything about it.

We bought this game with the intention to use all the features that are supposed to come with it, and you guys at EA can't even cope with your own servers.

As for me, I haven't been able to upload a single clip since early august. [...] ¹³

Others, like the former *Skate* forum operator ‘whoisbriannn’, tried to be more patient:

whoisbriannn: [...] My filmer pack was fine, but now is lost, so I tried redownloading and once it was at 100% I went into the game and it is still not working. It is on my hard drive, it's there physically, but it is not working in game. This is the issue a lot of people are having... This is also the case with all other lost DLC, you can redownload it, but it will not

¹³ <http://forum.ea.com/eaforum/posts/list/15/7512798.page>

register in game still. [...] I also cannot download graphics into my game, download parks, or upload clips (when my filmer pack was working). There is a window of time where we can upload clips, but that is between 5 a.m. and 8 a.m. EST for me and with a 1 year old son, waking up that early and trying to go back to sleep is not possible all the time.

I am trying to be patient and I hope everyone else is also, we're putting our faith in EA right now. It's obvious these problems arose from EA cutting off the Skate 1 servers on August 11th and I'm sure having let go of almost the entire Skate development team it is difficult to resolve issues with the game now. However, they need to be fixed, when I can't use content I paid for when I'm offline in the game... there's a serious issue.

Please EA_Agent X, help us fix these problems and stop giving us solutions that are not working. We're not going to just go away, we've been here for 5+ years and we really care about this game and this community. It's not fair to us as loyal customers to be treated this way...¹⁴

As a direct result from the skate.ea.com site losing its functionality, player communities have begun to disband. A functioning community and the ability to create and showcase skate videos are so important to skateboarding culture that the entire subculture structured around *Skate 3* seems to be dying off. On user sites like likebuttermag.com and skatefluckit.com users were lamenting the online problems as a great loss. As one of the leading figures of the site described:

We here at the Fluckit Forums are the last and most dedicated followers of this series. Over the years we've become a close knit community of skateboarders, artists, video artists, writers, and musicians. After only a little more than a year EA has shut down our servers. We don't ask for much. Please allow us to trade our in-game original art, in-game original skateparks. Please allow us to upload and download clips so that we can play this game the way it was intended. We know we'll never see another game. We'll never see a completely perfected build of the best skateboarding video game of all time. Isn't that punishment enough? Please let us play the way that we love, so that our community may continue to thrive and our friendships be built even stronger over time.¹⁵

¹⁴ <http://forum.ea.com/eaforum/posts/list/15/7512798.page>

¹⁵ <http://forum.ea.com/eaforum/posts/list/0/8173471.page#20488740>

And yet, on sites like these players *do* overcome these problems, using third party capture cards (devices that let the user connect console to PC and record what is seen) and outside editing software to create videos and send them to YouTube. Here, users mimic actual skateboarding videos to great detail, while also creating completely new directorial styles – a machinima subculture so rich it demands its own research. Curiously, these players do not modify the ‘intended’ nature of the game they are playing, rather than rise above its technical limitations, fulfilling the initial promise of *Skate 3* to the degree the developers, despite their intentions, never could.

Elsewhere, on the NeoGAF thread “Is EA’s ‘Skate’ franchise dead?” many users were confident that the *Skate* series would eventually return and that a gap in the release schedule might do it some good:

SolidSnakex: I really doubt that it's dead. EA is likely just doing the smart thing and giving it a break. They got into a Tony Hawk type pattern with it. It just seems like they stopped before they really put the franchise in a hole.

JustAnotherOtaku: The three games were great, but it was clear by number 3 that the ideas were drying up. For the sake of the series, it would be better to give it a rest for a while or add new DLC like new parks/spots/boards/skaters a couple of times a year. Otherwise we'll have a new Tony Hawk on our hands.

Snuggler: It was kind of funny to see Skate 1 succeed because it was a fresh alternative to the tired Tony Hawk franchise, only for EA to decide and push out 2 more entries within the next few years. Way to learn from your competition's mistakes, EA.

the walrus: [...] This whole "we'll fix it in the sequel" attitude was a huge misstep IMO. They got their franchise off on the wrong foot, and then released Skate 2 - under the whole idea of "this is what Skate 1 should have been in the first place". Then they flooded the market long after it became financially viable to even sustain two games in the first place
[T7]

The commenting draws attention to the fact that not only was the market exhausted with content, but also that the market cannot sustain too many installments. If the comment by ‘the walrus’ is seen referring to the tendency to turn games into ongoing services, it, too, points to the notion of exhaustive franchising and the ongoing game service being in conflict with each other, or at least that the two should be better joined in order them to work.

Overall, it seems that the increasing emphasis on online components has become too important for the modern games. Now, even some single-player games require the player to connect online in order to play at all (*Settlers 7*, 2010; *Diablo 3*, 2012). Based solely on the experiences with *Skate 3*, it seems that waiting too long to get into the game service is risking the possibility that the significant parts of the game are not anymore available or functioning. Games that do not have an outside way of moving around essential content are essentially crippled if the service is shut down. In the face of servers shutting down or losing their functionality, marketing rhetoric implying a game to be service instead of a product is very unsustainable practice.

5.6 Chapter conclusions: the fragmented experience

In this fifth chapter I have described the history of *Skate 3* player community from the perspective of the DLC model and its effects. Through secondary data analysis I have tried to convey a comprehension of a transition period – from the announcement of the game to the present day (Sep 2009 – Mar 2012) – *Skate 3* as a game service has gone through. The analysis has revealed both direct opinions towards DLC, but also several indirect consequences caused by the model.

Direct evaluation clearly tells us that different players want different things. Some players welcome any and all new game content, expecting there to be a sequel after sequel and DLC packs in between to bridge these sequels. Others feel that instead of DLC there should be only properly designed, full games or game sequels. For them, DLC is an extortionist marketing sham, charging players for content that should have been included in the game for free. Finally, there are the players for whom the DLC model seems like the best way to proceed. They feel that the game series should concentrate on the game at hand, turning it into a heavily supported service with regularly introduced DLC. As DLC is an expected part of the game series, it presents also a possibility to negotiate some positive changes into the game.

It seems that the majority of players are very accustomed to the various forms of franchising. Overwhelmingly, users suggest add-on content they feel could be managed by the developers, such as game modes and accessories available in other installments. Voices wishing for any larger modifications to the game do not gain peer support, but

instead are met with cynicism or sarcasm. The developer, on the other hand, rarely acknowledges any other comments besides the ones that align with their plan. As *Skate 3* showcased, when these wishes are heard (as with party play), it is through exhausting campaigning and at very slow speed. Here, the initial assumptions of the strategic agility are somewhat toned down by the lumbering reality of the “corporate responsiveness”.

One of the most common criticisms toward DLC is that it leads developers to obtrusively split their games to pieces. As many players feel that the add-on content should have been not only a part of the game to begin with, but also free-of-charge, they get nervous really easily. Unlock codes disguising as downloadable content and the confusion over the intricacies of the game-as-a-service do not make the situation any better. It is this fragility of the pleasant user experience, how easily it is broken, that seems to rise to the center of the reception towards DLC.

Recalling the three circuits by Kline et al. (2003) and the multiple roles different actors get in them, we can say that gamers go through three different experiences: *play experience*, *user experience*, and *customer experience*. First, as evidenced by *Skate 3*, DLC divides the **play experience** into several pieces, denying the player the “whole experience” unless she buys all the DLC packs and collects all the other scattered pieces such as the Dr. Pepper items. If one member of a skate team has a specific DLC, others are forced to get it too in order to skate the same locations. Second, the *Skate 3* **user experience** is hampered by the confusion over how game-as-a-service exactly works, as players are forced to gather information on the Internet and left to wonder whether or not DLC even works in certain situations. Third, for many players DLC spoils the **customer experience** by 1) accruing additional costs over time, 2) making players feel they are charged for content they have already paid for, and 3) by selling a service that simply ceases to function over time.

Thus it becomes clear that the customer experience in the new digital economy is a delicate balance act. Here, two sets of expectations clash. While some expect to buy a product paid up front, others (mostly developer) see game content as a service, distributed over time, with a new, different set of rights. While some gamers feel that content released after the main game should be free, developers obviously feel that to maintain service and to cover the associated costs gamers should be charged regularly. Game

companies would be wise to clear up this kind of confusions in order to preserve and nurture user trust.

Based on the case of *Skate 3*, it seems that the emphasis on online components has not been properly considered. Online creates haves and have-nots, as not everyone can play or pay online. Without online there is no possibility of local multiplayer, as the party play feature is not available anywhere else besides the associated DLC. Many players feel that through a game centered on online play and an advertised DLC plan the developer gives an implied promise of a long service relationship. Understandably, these players feel betrayed when this service is shut down. Here, game franchising seems actually to contradict itself with the game-as-a-service. While franchising is based on creating on the continuance of the game series, it is actually not profitable for the publisher to keep the servers running after there is no longer revenue flow coming from the game. While the revenue flow could be stretched to be longer with ongoing updates, the marketing imperatives of the digital game marketplace dictate that stagnation is backwardness; trends, genres, and franchises need to move on.

6 DISCUSSION: LIFTING THE VEIL

In this discussion chapter I will first go over the transition in digital game serialization in a bit more conversational manner. Here, DLC is observed from a wider angle in order to initiate discussion on some of the other ramifications the DLC model has on the gaming culture and to bring together some of the focus points of this thesis. Finally, I stop to reflect on the methodological approach behind the thesis.

The conflicting service

It is easy to observe how the DLC model offers players an increased number of options when it comes to stages, play modes, and other game content. Yet, as described in the previous chapter, players have different kinds of attitudes towards the DLC model. Though the close reading of *Skate 3* and its DLC packs indicates that the increase in content gives more options, we can now also see how the exhaustive franchising and its latest form, game-as-a-service, actually contradict each other.

On one hand the game serialization relies heavily on multiple game installments sold through traditional retail outlets. As many gamers still do not have an Internet connection, they cannot buy their games or add-on content through online marketplaces. Partly because of this, the DLC attach rate, the percentage of players who owns the main game and gets also the DLC pack, is not nearly good enough to support to full weight of expanding the game series. Many gamers also prefer full-sized sequels over DLC.

On the other hand, the modern game serialization relies increasingly on the game service. As so much of it is based on trust, the overall credibility of the service system becomes an increasingly important factor. Among other things, the service model requires developer to maintain servers and release DLC packs long after the actual launch of the game – in some views even after a proper sequel has been released. As DLC is not profitable enough and upholding servers costs money (not to mention any other ongoing services requiring hired personnel), it is easy to see why a notion of a longstanding service is so implausible.

Besides being confusing and misleading for gamers, the heavy reliance on DLC has the danger of breaking the game as a product in other ways. Recently, game studios have started to place essential parts of game story on a new-copy DLC pack (*Batman: Arkham City*, 2011; *Mass Effect 3*, 2012). As a result, many gaming sites have questioned whether this content will be any more available after many years, when the consoles and marketplaces of this generation have been shut down. Since people can download, delete, and re-download DLC packs, what happens after 10 years if the gamer does not have the essential DLC on her hard drive – is the content lost forever? Since the servers are already touted for being expensive to uphold (thus justifying the added cost of the online pass), it is hard to "imagine companies devoting server space to downloading a portion of a game that came out 10 years ago"¹⁶. On one hand, DLC as an unlock code for content already on the disc is loathed upon, while on the other hand the content should be on the disc to secure access to it even after many years.

Another contradiction lies in the combination of the DLC model and user-generated content. As a robust editor mode coupled with the ability to share one's creations is one of the best service features there is, it is hard to imagine developers providing a complete editor mode when at the same time everybody knows they need to sell add-on content too. When games like *Skate 3* ('Skate.Create Upgrade Pack') and *LittleBigPlanet* utilize a model where DLC packs are sold to improve the editor mode, the initial incompleteness of the tool is underlined.

DLC in relation to modding

The fact that there has not been a PC version of any of the *Skate* games leads one to wonder the reasons behind the omission. Surely there are profits to be made on the PC side also, so why not extend the franchise there. Indeed, from the perspective of political economy this decision too seems to be motivated by marketing. Observing the user-generated skate parks, skate videos, virtual skateboarding magazines, and the like, it is

¹⁶ <http://www.gameinformer.com/b/podcasts/archive/2011/12/01/game-informer-show-91-minecraft-mario-kart-7-online-passes.aspx>

easy to believe that the player community, given the chance, could easily “take over” the lucrative culture surrounding the game, producing its own content such as mods, skins, and expansions. This would potentially damage DLC sales, while on PC it would be also considerably easy to start user-hosted servers to run a completely independent game community.

As the PC side allows that much more space for player alterations, and as the gaming industry has gone all-out for more control over consumer choices, mods manifest an important battleground of conflicting interests. Commercial and non-commercial add-ons can co-exist, sure, but packaging what is essentially a mod can be seen as a countermove by the developers and must be seen connecting into the wider struggle over “user control”. Originally spun off by hobbyists and hackers from military research, and subsequently commercialized and domesticated by the entertainment industry, digital games can be seen to have “recaptured” by modders. Although the power wrested for the users by the modders still exists, industry has taken some of it back. Media companies are “ceaselessly promoting the advantages of ‘user control’ as a form of democratic participation” (Palmer, 2003). For Palmer, then, “active readership” (cf. Jenkins, 2006) transforms into commercialized illusion of control without critical potential. As Crawford (2012, 122) reminds, corporations possess the capability to appropriate, sterilize, and sell back to consumers the methods of contestation and resistance. Saturating the markets with commercial add-ons, game industry moves toward substituting “prosumerism” with consumerism.

And yet, many times the texts produced by cultural industries do not support this notion. Texts *do* in fact open possibilities for alteration, customization, and agency. For Hesmondhalgh (2007, 4), this is because in the competitive industry companies need to take risks in trying to one up each other. Many times, it can be argued, this means abandoning obtrusive and repetitive strategies and giving leeway to gamers’ needs. As Nieborg (2011) argues, publishing hit games means “constantly oscillating between exploitation and experimentation”. It remains to be seen whether the DLC model evolves into something that better accommodates user feedback into the on-going design of the game service – or if it is even possible.

Methodological considerations

How to go about researching an industry segment as ambivalent as DLC, on one hand an increase in moving space for the player, while on the other hand a seemingly power mongering industry mechanism? Hesmondhalgh (2007, 4) raises the question whether the cultural industries serve the interests of their owners or are they a force of their own? As he suggests, there is no easy answer. Each media technology should be contextualized and evaluated on its own merits, case by case. For the researcher interested in the locations and relations of power within the games industry, then, a case study was the best solution. While DLC does not present as many conversational opportunities as for example mods, it represents a potential site for power struggle between developers and players. Thus a more holistic approach examining production and consumption in conjunction was inevitable.

I believe DLC showcases – better than perhaps even mods – just how deeply the different areas of production, texts, distribution, and consumption connect to each other, and subsequently why it is so important to include as many of these as possible into the analysis. The three-fold model inspired by Kellner served this purpose, while tying the analysis into the longer tradition of media studies. A multi-perspective model, such as the one used here, was essential in giving a properly honest picture of a phenomenon like DLC. In my opinion, utilizing critical political economy was clearly the best choice for researching a transitional phenomenon the DLC model essentially is. These kinds of transformation processes from one established model to something new – from blockbuster model to harnessing the potential of bite-sized content – are precisely where the research should be focused. There is no point examining game industry during its most comfortable moment. On the contrary, in order to get a better look of the internal workings of a debated sector such as game industry the researcher must wait for an opening a transitional period or perhaps a crisis offers. As mentioned in the Chapter 1.4, in the restless game industry the current marketing models continuously give birth to new combinations. For instances like these I can recommend the three-fold model without reservations.

Blending the three perspectives worked decently enough considering that for a long time I only had two perspectives: that of the industry and that of the players. This is no

doubt reflected in the structure of the analysis, but I do not think it hampers the end result too much. Looking back, I feel the second focus area, DLC as a cultural text, melds perhaps a tad too much into the first area of production: a more forceful separation of the two might have yielded more pronounced results. Still, coming into this conclusion serves to reflect how blended into each other the areas of production, distribution, and the cultural text are in the case of DLC – thus backing my analysis.

Reflecting on my treatment of the third area, the reception, I believe my justifications for using secondary data analysis to be true. While some might argue a more participatory ethnographic approach to be more “proper” research – being perhaps a bit more traditional method for studies like these –, the “passive approach” can and should be valued for its obvious merits (listed in the Chapter 5.1). Having said that, I can see alternative ways to conduct research on DLC. Considering the areas this study does not touch upon, an interview process, for example, might return interesting user reflection on DLC, focusing more on player wishes and different possibilities for the model. Finally, being an iterative mechanism for digital games, the DLC model presents a lot of room for design and innovation research too.

7 CONCLUSIONS

Through the case study of *Skate 3*, I have described in this thesis how the DLC model is utilized in the modern games industry. The introduction of online connectivity and a hard drive has changed how console games can be marketed and sold, as it is now possible to patch, update, and publish more content after the game is released. DLC is the latest, and still evolving, marketing strategy in the long line of entertainment industry franchising practices. It draws both from the expandable possibilities of a game engine and from the convergence of media technology and content. In this thesis, my intention has been to shed light on an uncharted territory and problematize DLC as a popular but potentially exploitative marketing mechanism. Each media technology should be evaluated separately and, concentrating on DLC, this is precisely what I have set out to do with this case study.

In the introduction chapter I described how DLC continues earlier franchising practices and combines elements from them to form a service model of its own. In the methodology chapter I suggested that a three-way model combining political economy analysis of production and texts together with a fan ethnographic reception study helps to form a well-rounded comprehension of DLC as a part of wider cultural industries. Following Meehan (2000), I suggested that combining these areas serves to balance optimism and pessimism on both sides.

In the third chapter I gave a description of the case game *Skate 3*, its DLC packs, and the publisher of the game, Electronic Arts. I also pointed out how EA exemplifies well many of the transgressions game industry is accused of. In the analysis chapter four I showed how DLC connects to the wider games industry shift towards digitalization and service thinking. Although DLC and the physical game copy mostly exist in support of each other, DLC marks perhaps the most relevant sign of the ongoing feud between the traditional retail and the newer digital distribution. In this fight between used game sales and the complete hegemony over the video game value chain, DLC is used to extend the lifespan of a video game by turning a single product into a full-fledged service. The fragmented form of DLC can be also used to persuade player-customers to buy their games new and coax them to use online services. Thus DLC can be clearly seen affecting the ways console games are marketed.

In the fifth chapter I explored the ramifications of the DLC marketing model to the player community. As expected, players respond in various ways to DLC. While some players welcome all the added content wholeheartedly, others abhor DLC for various reasons, such as the low quality of add-on content, incrementally accruing costs, and DLC's crippling dependency on the online connection. The change from physical copies to digital content creates confusion over what exactly is being bought. Many players seem to be completely unaware, for instance, that the game copies they buy sometimes act as mere use licenses. Game companies would do well to clarify this kind of perplexities in order to maintain and nurture user trust.

In the end, I also suggested that EA is contradicting itself by, on the one hand giving implied promises of a service relationship and basing its game forcefully on online components, and on the other hand letting its game servers and customer support slowly deteriorate, eventually quickly disbanding its game service once it ceases to be profitable. In this light, it becomes apparent that the model is still suffering from birthing pains.

Overall my analysis suggests that, as a marketing practice, DLC affects the play and the surrounding culture of console games in significant ways. First, it pushes the integration of production, distribution, and textual form into surprisingly far reaching depths, and as such demands unusually careful dissection. Second, DLC marks a clear attempt to shape consumer behavior through marketing mechanisms. Finally, because of the marketing imperatives, DLC – for better or for worse – fragments the form of the traditional console game. However, as *Skate 3* demonstrates, the DLC model does not mark any kind of over-night revolution. Rather, presently it stands as an important supplementary feature in a larger service. It presents interesting new possibilities for digital games. For an increasing number of players it is also an expected — almost inevitable — part of a modern game franchise.

Illustrating an important transitional trajectory between the blockbuster digital game and the more agile, app-sized content, DLC offers a great starting point for game scholars interested in the ways techno-capitalist market imperatives shape the contemporary digital game. *Skate 3* and its DLC packs have served as a poignant case study for utilizing political economy analysis on an ambivalent game culture technology. I also believe this thesis contributes to existing research by introducing a new area of game industry,

as no significant studies centered specifically on DLC have been released. As the DLC and mod cultures can be seen attaching into each other, this study could also provide stimulus for researchers looking to trace the logic behind the commercialized participatory culture. There, a cross-examination from the history perspective of modding, expansion packs, and DLC could prove useful.

Finally, one more possible topic for future research could be examining the ways DLC connects to other emerging trends in the gaming culture. A gaming experience built on a continuous flow of new content is also familiar from free-to-play games. Looking from a wider angle, DLC and free-to-play have been slowly but steadily approaching the same service model of endless updates and virtual items. The pace that the game industry uses to divide and serialize game content has become increasingly fast. First physical expansion packs were used to fill gaps between main game installments, then digitally distributed add-on content filled gaps between the larger add-on packs, and finally the game as a service erased the gaps altogether. This way, the franchise does not stop at all, but is rather available all the time through micro-transactions, increasingly often also on the console side. In Diagram 1, this evolution of the publishing rate of digital game franchise has been abstracted into five hypothetical phases, or modes, of production:

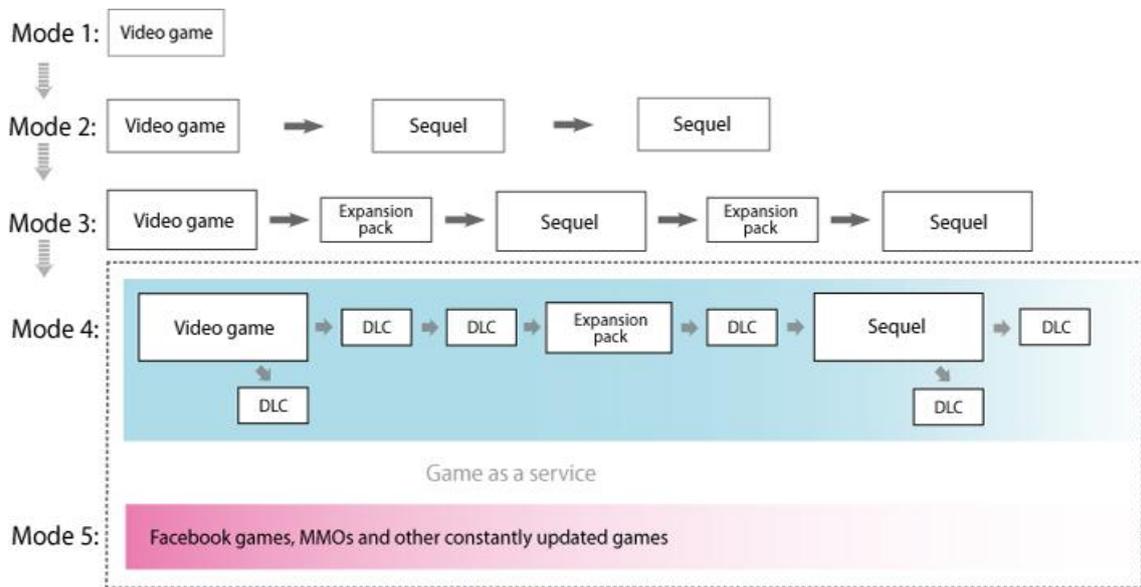


Diagram 1. DLC and the evolution of video game serialization model (Tyni, 2012)

Both the free-to-play-game and the console-game-as-a-service rely more and more on the integration of game design and marketing in incentivizing virtual goods purchases.

Both also benefit from the direct or partial connection to the end-user in improving and innovating their services. Finally, in both cases a clash between the traditional product and a more modern service can be evidenced: as with free-to-play games, the outlines of the game-with-DLC have become blurry. It is hard to see where the actual game ends and where the monetized service starts, aggravating those looking for a traditional game product.

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