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Abstract

Games critics arguably influence the form games take, identities of players, and identities of game developers. However, very little work in *Game Studies* examines how critical games journalism, games, developers, and independent actors intersect. This paper argues that pragmatic sociology of critique, developed by Luc Boltanski, can act as a theoretical framework to aid in understanding these processes of critique. Utilizing a theoretical lens such as this helps us better understand the function of games critique within the video game industry. Applying this framework to a case study of monetization and 'loot boxes,' this paper emphasizes the role and power of journalistic critique in shaping gaming cultures, and the consumption and production of media more generally.

*Keywords*: monetization, games critique, pragmatic sociology of critique, economic platform studies, video game industry

# How Does Games Critique Impact Game Design Decisions?

## A Case Study of Monetization and Loot Boxes

Critique, or the disputes that emerge within our daily lives, have always been present within games culture and the industry. *Game Studies* traditionally focused on analyses of game representations, world-building and narrative, and player actions (Pérez Latorre, 2015). While analysis is common in *Game Studies*, there is little theorization around the role of critique, how it functions, and its impact on game production practices. Studying critical games writing is important given how this writing influences how games and games culture (Kümpel & Haas, 2016). Previous scholarship on games critique focuses on the inherently subjective, embodied experience of playing games as reviewers (Jennings, 2015). But others argue that more attention should be paid to the relationship between game analysts and the media they judge (Keogh, 2014). In this paper, I offer a theoretical framework to better understand the power of *critique itself* and the role it plays in industry transformations, applying it to a case study of loot boxes.

I draw on Boltanski's (2011) *On Critique: A Sociology of Emancipation,* applying a theoretical framework that emphasizes the power of everyday individuals working in games, instead of a critical elite, such as academics. I predominantly focus on more popular writing venues such as *Waypoint* and middle-state publishing such as *First Person Scholar* that act as a 'networked fourth estate' with the collective aim of keeping the video game industry in check (Benkler, 2006). Primarily staffed by either freelance, contract, or volunteer writers, these sites and others are not considered to be an elite. This is in contrast to more traditional games journalism sites (such as *IGN* or *GameSpot*) and magazines which largely focus on games reviews, driving consumerism and acting as 'tastemakers' (Kirkpatrick, 2013, 2015). This analysis is applied at a time where commentary within the industry is often regarded as

unnecessary by certain groups of consumers and if criticism should be regarded as censorship or progress (Jenkins, 2015; Ramanan, 2017; Senior, Fenlon, & Wilde, 2018). I additionally draw on Boltanski and Chiapello's earlier work (2005), to consider how economic reproaches specifically impact the industry. The framework offered by Boltanski and Chiapello has been utilized previously in games production studies, specifically to examine shifts from large-scale production to small team and data-driven design (Jennifer R. Whitson, 2019). Within the context of this paper, this framework assists us in better understanding interdependencies between critics and developers, who in response to public pressure generated from journalist commentaries, reflect upon and change their games accordingly. This model emphasizes how design, media, and 'everyday actors' (such as games critics) interact, categorizing the different forms of developer responses when faced with public and media backlash.

The use of Boltanski's sociology of critique offers significant contributions to our understanding of games critique, how it impacts production, and the role of critique more generally. Journalism studies as a discipline has been well-established for decades, but has primarily been concerned with the work of journalists themselves and the conditions of the industry they work in, rather than the impacts of their work more widely (Deuze, 2007). Journalism studies is contemporarily concerned with the challenges the industry faces surrounding ownership, objectivity, and relations with 'the public' (Calcutt & Hammond, 2011). My use of Boltanski arguably coincides with the work of journalism studies, which seeks to understand the labour and internal crises of an industry but offers to bridge our understanding of how this industry potentially shapes and impacts the production of another in significant ways through their work. In order to distinguish this work from journalism studies more generally, and

to keep it in line with Boltanski's sociology of critique, I refer mainly to games critics, but mean this to extend to those who write, publish, network, and think on games widely and publicly.

Shifts in models of game development and the re-organization of labour have been previously examined (see: Kerr, 2017; Lipkin, 2012; Whitson, 2012). Economic analyses of the video game industry are significant as the industry continues to grow as a large contributor to global media and entertainment economies (Marchand & Hennig-Thurau, 2013). While this work no doubt fits in with work that has tackled the political economy of the video game industry (see: Dyer-Witheford & Sharman, 2005; Joseph, 2017; Kerr, 2017) and therefore may fit in with the more economic-centered analyses of political economy more generally, my main focus here is on the processes of critique as a function and how it intersects with production practices and collective understanding of games issues. Issues of how critique shapes and informs games culture and its communities is arguably lost with a focus only on the economics involved. Furthermore, the work of critics is important, but is increasingly operating outside of the scope of formal economies in systems of freelancing or through activity on social media sites such as Twitter (Calcutt & Hammond, 2011; Hermida, 2014). Beyond discussions of this free and precarious labour, which is not my focus here, a political economy approach faces difficulties in grasping at these cultural practices and influences. In this paper, I specifically focus on one issue in the video game industry: monetization, or, the mechanisms by which a developer earns revenue from their game and the cultural practices and implications of critique. Developers always face issues due to their monetization models and the criticisms they receive arguably contribute to larger industry changes, therefore, it is imperative to work to understand how these processes of critique occur and their implications on wider production, consumption, and culture (Nieborg, 2016).

While *Game Studies* is beginning to understand the importance of economic platform studies and economic shifts within the industry, there are few theoretical frameworks to unpack these shifts that also take into consideration their cultural significance and impact on communities. Three topics are examined in this paper: 1) historical shifts of monetization the importance of their study; 2) Luc Boltanski's conception of pragmatic sociology of critique and its application to *Game Studies* and 3) commentary surrounding a controversial form of monetization: loot boxes. 'Loot box' monetization, or the use of gambling- or chance-based mechanics to profit from consumers, are emblematic of a monetization model widely considered to be exploitative of consumers. This paper argues the importance of analyzing critique within the field of *Game Studies* to reveal divisive fault lines within the industry.

This analysis helps us understand transformations and the influence of wider discourse in game design practices. Furthermore, the work of games critics, who are often unpaid or work in precarious freelance positions, is arguably deserving of study. Graeme Kirkpatrick (2015) argues that writing on games is formative for games culture and shapes the perceptions of games and 'gamers.' I argue an extension of this, that games critics, rather than providing only simple commentary, serve to drive large and wide-ranging changes in game design that inform choices in game development, the genres and aesthetics of games, and the way that revenue is extracted from consumers. While consumers do certainly possess a large amount of power through their purchasing, especially in areas of leisure and entertainment products such as games, games critics arguably act to direct this purchasing power in at least some manner.

**The Shifting Reality of Monetization**

Utilizing Boltanski and Chiapello's (2005) and Boltanski's (2011) later work, I argue that economic shifts and controversy can be traced within monetization to better understand

processes of change. These shifts are encapsulated in the transformation from ‘blockbuster’ monetization (where games are purchased once for a premium price) to ‘free-to-play’ monetization (where games are free to access but require smaller incremental purchases over time). The bulk of Boltanski and Chiapello’s (2005, p. 162) work defined the “spirit of capitalism.” This spirit is an underlying ideology justifying widespread commitment to capitalism, rendering it viable and attractive, and included shifts from traditional bureaucratic workplaces to the emergence of networked firms and the rejection of hierarchical domination (Boltanski & Chiapello, 2005, p. 162). Defined as continuous accumulation of capital through ‘peaceful means,’ capitalism exploits labourers in a never-ending system through its ‘spirit,’ to justify and maintain worker involvement (Boltanski & Chiapello, 2005, p. 162). Resistance to these systems is incorporated into capitalism, shifting capitalism in significant ways (Boltanski & Chiapello, 2005, p. 163). Broadly, criticism arises when a difference is observed between what is idealized or fair in capitalism and the reality experienced by everyday individuals (Boltanski & Chiapello, 2005, p. 173).

Criticisms are handled differently by independent actors (such as different game development studios) but must be responded to remain legitimate (Boltanski & Chiapello, 2005, p. 174). A critical assessment could be proven false through a re-organization of the system, such as quick changes in policy (Boltanski & Chiapello, 2005, p. 174). Alternatively, issues can be circumvented to avoid major re-structuring (e.g. moving production to regions with less regulation in response to worker rights violations in the original country) (Boltanski & Chiapello, 2005, p. 174). The primary task of these condemnations is to identify key issues within a capitalist system and offer the opportunity to either clarify or correct these issues so that they appear fair (Boltanski & Chiapello, 2005, p. 175).

Boltanski and Chiapello can be used to characterize shifts in video game monetization models. Two forms of monetization discussed are summarized in Table 1 and draws from Boltanski and Chiapello's framework to highlight problems and solutions associated with each model. Previous research in *Game Studies* examined historical and political economic shifts (see: Dyer-Witheford & Peuter, 2009; Marchand & Hennig-Thurau, 2013). However, contemporary shifts including the rise of smartphone and tablet games, independent games development, and shifts in how games are monetized, are underrepresented in *Game Studies* (Kerr, 2017; Whitson, 2012). The role of monetization requires further investigation and arguably impacts how games are consumed and purchased, but also who can have a career in games. As monetization is one way that developers define the relationship with their consumers, the implications of their transformation should be interrogated. With a focus on monetization, economic platform studies is used to analyze the shift from 'blockbuster' models of monetization to 'free-to-play' models.

[ INSERT TABLE 1 ABOUT HERE]

Economic platform studies, in the context of games, ask how economic contexts can "enable, constrain, shape, and support creative work" (Deterding, 2016). Based within technological platform studies and film production studies (see: Bogost & Montfort, 2009; Caldwell, 2008; Salter & Murray, 2014; van Dijck, 2013) it emphasizes dynamics of game design patterns, genres, and business models (Deterding, 2016). Economic platform studies investigate how economic shifts alter the appeal and viability of games for developers, consumers, and users (such as shifts in consumer taste of genres, e.g., the saturation and subsequent decline of Massively Multiplayer Online Role Playing Games (MMORPGs)) (Deterding, 2016). Not without precedent, the examination the economic conditions of the industry within *Game Studies* is niche, but previously interrogated economic shifts on the

subjectivities of ‘games’ and ‘gamers’ (Kline, Dyer-Witheford, & Peuter, 2003; O’Donnell, 2009; Whitson, 2012). Historically tracing these shifts establishes clear distinctions between different models of monetization.

Historically, triple-A studios (large studio corporations, e.g., Ubisoft, Electronic Arts) focused their development on ‘blockbuster’ games. Blockbuster games follow a “hit-driven publishing strategy” that relies on profiting from established franchises for revenue (Nieborg, 2011:3). This relies on one-time purchases of polished retail products from large, established fanbases (Nieborg, 2011; White, Koch, Gehrke, & Demers, 2009). Several critiques emerged out of this form of monetization including a stagnation in creative game aesthetics. Combined with high development costs, risk aversion meant developers were less likely to take creative risks, placing a greater emphasis on sequels and proven genres (Nieborg, 2011). Consumers were additionally required to purchase games in full before playing leading to consumer uncertainty as they were unable to assess the value before purchase (Andersson & Andersson, 2006). Players, games critics, and other developers became increasingly frustrated with this model, fueled by the restrictive and cyclical nature of hardware platform development (Johns, 2006; Williams, 2002). Hardware knowledge that would allow more creative forms of development were ‘black boxed’ through expensive software development kits, software engines, and gatekeeping that made console development inaccessible and unknowable to both consumers and independent developers (Johns, 2006; Williams, 2002). Combined with the emergence of new technologies and an adaptive, capitalistic instinct to survive, new models of monetization emerged within the industry (Whitson, 2012).

New models of monetization are predicated upon the proliferation of smartphones and tablets, leading to a diversification in platforms (Helmond et al., 2017; Mäyrä, 2008). With sped-

up development cycles and significantly lower costs, developers were able to innovate games for un-tapped markets supported by un-tested monetization models. This growth in game development indicated that new models could succeed outside of traditional 'blockbuster' monetization. Referred to as free-to-play monetization, Nieborg (2016) classifies five of the main methods commonly used. Overall, they are characterized by a lack of up-front purchase by consumers, replaced with smaller sustained purchases over time (Nieborg 2016). These five models are captured in Table 2.

[INSERT TABLE 2 ABOUT HERE]

However, many of the strategies employed in free-to-play monetization have their history in arcade slot machines. Coin-operated machines in general (from vending machines to strength testers to slot machines) emerged in the 1880s and provided innovative and supposedly interactive stimulus to consumers (Huhtamo, 2005). At first found in stores, restaurants, and bars, these machines soon were found in dedicated establishments, commonly known as "penny arcades" and relied on the psychological mesmerizing effect of intensive feedback loops. At the time, designers understood the goal of making consumers spend as much as possible as quickly as possible in small increments and can be seen worldwide today in the continued proliferation of slot machines (Fisher & Griffiths, 1995; Huhtamo, 2005). In the early to mid-1990s these arcades and gambling halls came under criticism for their exploitation of consumers, in an effort to combat this, the industry shifted its focus from games of chance, to games of skill, which led to the new forms of gambling in casinos and pinball games in arcades (Fisher & Griffiths, 1995; Huhtamo, 2005). Overall, the history of shifts in monetization in the games industry is similar to previous shifts in coin-operated penny games, arcades, and pinball machines.

In contemporary practice, developers use a mix of monetization models to create the feeling of choice for consumers, mixing both moments of chance and skill together (Nieborg, 2016). As developers continue to refine their implementation of free-to-play monetization, development of games transforms to tailor certain styles of play and consumption to maximize profits. This includes the extension of time-on-device, increased push notifications, 'check-in' features of free-to-play games, and emphasizing perceived social benefits to items (such as more appealing customizations, quarantining items behind paywalls) (Animesh, Pinsonneault, Yang, & Oh, 2011; Guo & Barnes, 2009; Huang, 2012; Mäntymäki & Salo, 2015). In summary, the problems associated with 'blockbuster' development brought about changes in how games were made and monetized, driven by critique, while introducing new complications to address. Moving forward, theoretical frameworks are needed to better grasp these processes of analysis and transformation within the industry.

**The Context, Process, and Necessity of Critique**

Boltanski's (2011) "pragmatic sociology of critique" interrogates the function and process of commentary. Critique is defined simply as "disputes of daily life [that] denounce people, systems, events […] characterized as unjust by reference to particular situations or context" (Boltanski, 2011, p. 6). Heavy importance on the process, structure, and necessity of the dispute is emphasized rather than the content. Boltanski (2011) argues that commentary is the only defense against systems of oppression or domination from institutions (such as video game developers and publishers), who seek to maintain reality through repetition and control, and that critique can be exercised, not just by the powerful, but by all individual actors in society.

In games, much of the power is held by developers and publishers, thus the role of games critics is to expose contradictions where the industry requires change. It should also be noted that

consumers possess a large amount of power in their purchasing power. However, as critics work to bring disputes to a larger, mainstream platform, they break cycles of repetition and exploitation to aid consumers with a foundation of knowledge to judge these institutions and direct their consumer power. This section explores Boltanski's work on critique, focusing on three of his main arguments: 1) that there exists 'practical' and 'metapragmatic' moments; 2) that institutions are bodiless entities, who attempt to construct reality through a process of 'confirmation' and the use of spokespeople; and 3) that critique is a necessary and integral part of society characterized by three forms of 'tests' that expose contradictions between what institutions say and what is experienced. While the tests will be explored in greater detail later, they are distinguished by who employs them and to what degree they are considered radical. Within games, tests can be considered as moments where game developers and publishers act to construct the experiences of their consumers, such as a press conference or game release.

Boltanski (2011) argues for a 'pragmatic' sociology of critique, or, that the capacity for judgement is held by ordinary individuals. This contrasts with traditional theories of critical sociology (see: Bourdieu, 2004) where power is held by a social elite. Instead, opportunities arise out of everyday disputes between the collective understanding of what should be (what Boltanski refers to as 'symbolic forms') and what is in fact experienced by individuals ('the state of affairs') (Boltanski, 2011, p. 109-110). These moments of dispute, referred to as 'metapragmatic,' emerge out of originally 'practical' moments where individuals come together to complete repetitive tasks that they collectively understand (p. 67-68). 'Metapragmatic' moments exercise more reflexivity and shift the focus from embodied action to characterizing action (Boltanski, 2011, p. 67-68). Representing a more self-referential approach, this aids in understanding the justification behind the action and if that aligns with the shared understanding

of what is right (Boltanski, 2011, p. 68). Boltanski (2011) uses the example of a graduate department committee going over student profiles, without any critical thought to their process (a practical moment), only to have their process questioned by one individual, upon which the process switches to a metapragmatic moment where the focus is on characterizing the process as correct or not, fair or unfair (p. 68).

Within games, press coverage about a common game mechanic affords the opportunity to reconsider whether it is ethical or not. Through these 'metapragmatic' moments language can be more critical to draw attention to the gap between what is being suggested (the 'symbolic form') and the reality of the situation (the 'state of affairs'). The difference between these two is typically characterized by exploitation or violence, and in recognizing the gap, individuals (i.e. consumers) recognize the violence as well. The process of shifting between a practical and metapragmatic moment is through, as Boltanski argues, the emergence of contradictions in a process of 'confirmation,' carried out by institutions and their spokespeople (Boltanski, 2011, p.72-73).

Institutions play an important role in Boltanski's (2011) conception of critique, where the two are tied together and cannot exist without the other. Institutions (such as government or corporations, in a traditional understanding) are regarded as a main source of violence, both symbolic and real, within society (Boltanski, 2011, p. 93-97). Criticism acts as both defense and emancipation from this violence (Boltanski, 2011, p. 97-99). However, we also rely on institutions to construct our reality for us through confirmation (Boltanski, 2011, p. 72-73). This process defines the 'what is' and 'what is not' within society, allowing for institutions to carry out their task – whether that be for profit, organization, or domination (Boltanski, 2011, p. 57, 94). Institutions are constantly caught up in the process of needing to confirm and re-confirm

reality to maintain their power and is done through a process of practices that establish a normative discourse, such as corporate statements or federal hearings (Boltanski, 2011, p. 99).

Boltanski (2011) argues that the use of spokespeople by these bodiless institutions creates unease when they attempt a 'confirmation' that strays too far from the reality experienced by individuals (p. 101-102). This gap offers a moment for critique to be utilized, referred to as a 'hermeneutic contradiction' where the gap is exposed to the wider public (Boltanski, 2011, p. 86-87). Boltanski (2011) uses the example of contradictions and disputes that arise between small town city councils and the lived experiences of their citizens, where they are able to recognize the gap previously invisible to demand change within the town (p. 85). However, within the video game industry these contradictions are observed between the 'pitch mode' talk of corporate public relations workers, who spend much of their work managing the expectations of consumers, and the lived experience of a consumer experiencing a game for themselves.

These 'hermeneutic contradictions' revolve around the presence of violence (considered as either symbolic domination or real, experienced harm), revealed through failed 'confirmations' by spokespeople (Boltanski, 2011, p. 84-87). Institutions hold the power to construct reality through 'confirmation' processes and exercise a dominative power how reality is interpreted (Boltanski, 2011, p. 93-97). Critique offers individuals the reflexive power to unmask and denounce the reality offered to potentially pave new pathways of resistance (Boltanski, 2011, p. 97-99). In this regard, there are three different types of critique, which Boltanski (2011) refers to as 'tests.' This includes 'truth tests,' carried out by institutions to re-affirm and stabilize the gap between the 'state of affairs' and 'symbolic forms,' mainly through a repetitive structure that establishes reality as normative (Boltanski, 2011, p. 103-105). Truth tests

embody the process of confirmation to "make visible the fact that there is a norm" (Boltanski, 2011, p. 104).

Within games, the yearly Electronic Entertainment Expo (colloquially referred to as 'E3') where game developers hold large, spectacle-like press conferences could be understood as a truth test and as an opportunity for developers to construct a normative reality for their consumers on what is alluring and exciting about their products through demonstrations and trailers. Second, 'reality tests' explore the gap between the 'state of affairs' and 'symbolic forms' allowing an acceptance of this gap or concessions on the part of institutions to reduce it (Boltanski, 2011, p. 105-107). Reality tests conservatively seek to experiment in spaces of uncertainty, rather re-confirm a supposed norm, and offer an opportunity of reform (Boltanski, 2011, p. 106-107). Continuing with the example of E3, a developer may introduce a new game, declared to be experimental and innovative. However, as the reality of this game is revealed, fans and critics can point to existing games that appear to do the same. Developers, now caught in a contradiction, must further justify their claims to close the gap. Boltanski (2011) notes that reality tests, while offering room for critique, ultimately result in reforms and compromises that still adhere to over-arching institutional structures, resulting in potentially minimal changes that reduce symbolic violence (p. 107).

Finally, and arguably most pertinent, are 'existential tests' which critique existing 'reality tests' through an acknowledgement of the violence they cause (Boltanski, 2011, p. 107-110). Situated in lived experiences, 'existential tests' radically seek to undo the relationship between what is accepted and what is experienced by others. I argue then that video game critics work to make the experiences of consumers visible and intelligible for purposes of criticism. Through the rejection of reality constructed by corporate interests, rhetorics of change are able to be adopted

in an effort to establish new symbolic forms and states of affairs. These analytical actors drive this work of analysis that is inherently provocative with intention and strategy in mind. Boltanski's (2011) conception of the process of critique is one that places the power within the hands of everyday individuals, informed by their experiences, to break down and reveal exploitative powers previously concealed with the goal of effecting change within reality. So far in this paper, I have outlined economic platform studies, and how processes of commentary work in games, now I will draw the two together, in a more detailed examination of a controversial model of monetization. In order to do so, an overview of how Boltanski, with Eve Chiapello, addresses economic shifts due to processes of critique is necessary.

**The Contradiction of Loot Box Monetization**

Journalistic accounts about controversial monetization strategies act as a site to apply Boltanski's frameworks, and 'tests', to help us categorize the different ways developers respond to commentary. As discussed previously, free-to-play monetization is an increasing standard within the industry. One form of free-to-play monetization is the use of microtransactions as 'loot boxes.' Examining commentary of loot boxes aids in understanding how critiques drive economic change and the importance that everyday actors play in these transformations. Loot boxes are typically purchased with virtual currency, through exchange of real world currency, and offer a chance of receiving individual items out of a larger pool of variable quality, desirability, and rarity (Koeder & Tanaka, 2017). This method of monetization has historical precedent in Japanese "gachapon" (ガチャポン) whereby consumers purchase small toy capsules from coin-operated vending machines to receive a variety of small miniature models, stickers, keychains, or other toys (Spiker, 2017).

Loot boxes typically contain cosmetic items to change a character's appearance, boosts to reduce the time needed to reach certain goals, or other unique items. Costs for loot boxes vary (some costing only a few dollars) depending on the quantity purchased at a single time. With the emergence of loot box microtransactions, similarities are drawn to traditional forms of chance-based gambling, such as slot machines (Heimo, Harviainen, Kimppa, & Mäkilä, 2016; Spiker, 2017; Zagal, Björk, & Lewis, 2013). Recognized as profitable, game developers acknowledge loot box monetization as inspired by gambling machine designs (Alha, Koskinen, Paavilainen, Hamari, & Kinnunen, 2014; Dixon, Harrigan, Sandhu, Collins, & Fugelsang, 2010). Linked to traditional gambling, loot box monetization poses complicated hurdles for government regulation with few successful legislative actions occurring internationally (de Kervenoael, Palmer, & Hallsworth, 2013; Sithigh, 2014).

With the launch of *Battlefront II*, developed by Electronic Arts as an action-shooter video game based on the Star Wars film franchise, there was an outpouring of resistance to their loot-box monetization model (see: Alexandra, 2017; Frank, 2017; Ore, 2017). Many of these articles pointed to the amount of content locked within loot boxes, effectively creating a gambling paywall to access all content 'included' in the game. This marked a controversial synthesis of free-to-play and blockbuster monetization, whereby publishers expect players to pay a high initial cost in addition to chance-based microtransactions to access all game content. Returning to Boltanski, this uniquely acted as a reality test for Electronic Arts to 'explore' the gap between the state of affairs and reality through a new mechanic of monetization in their game. In doing so, they attempted to confirm a new reality, one where a combination of free-to-play and premium modes of monetization was acceptable. However, they opened themselves up to the possibility of critique through their reality test. Games critics were quick to recognize the symbolic violence of

these loot boxes carried and the contradiction that existed in this confirmation. In addition, consumers themselves were upset, and added to the momentum of this dispute. Specifically, that EA impressed on their consumers the premium quality of their game, where one payment unlocked all content, when the reality was far different. This resulted in game journalist sites and social media platforms quickly filling with criticisms of Electronic Arts and loot boxes more generally (Alexandra, 2017; Ore, 2017; Wasserman, 2018). Polygon writer Ben Kuchera wrote, in response to the conversation surrounding *Battlefront II:*

> "…this tension and focus on each game's economy could hurt morale among developers themselves. It's going to be hard for players to care how well a character animates if they feel angered by games that are designed with an eye toward monetization instead of enjoyment. […] EA's focus on free-to-play style economies in its big releases might be profitable in the short term, but it's slowly strangling the company." (Kuchera, 2017)

This commentary is especially impactful when considering the earlier argument that commentary on games results in changes in developer labour and the power of these disputes. In addition, these critiques had been levied against the game industry for some time, but it took a larger moment of dispute for the criticism to hold power. In response, developers of *Battlefront II* cut prices in half but ultimately disabled microtransactions altogether (Frank, 2017). However, the release of *Battlefront II*, combined with the release of other games with similar forms of monetization, led to loot box criticism being addressed more generally within the industry (see: Alexandra, 2017; Ore, 2017). Many of the arguments indicated that loot boxes are widely considered to be a source of symbolic violence inherently designed to exploit consumers (Alexandra, 2017; Ore, 2017). Attention quickly turned towards video game regulatory bodies, who were quick to dismiss critiques as unsubstantiated as items within loot boxes have no real-world value and players always receive 'something' regardless of the perceived value of that item (Schreier, 2017). According to them, loot boxes could not be gambling despite the

widespread consumer reporting acknowledging them as such (Schreier, 2017). Self-regulatory organizations within the industry, in their own explorations of the reality test created by Electronic Arts, sought to conservatively re-confirm previous understanding of gambling and in-game monetization – almost arguing that nothing changed in their understanding of reality, that this situation was simply another opportunity to re-confirm through a truth test. This entire process is summarized in Table 3 alongside Boltanski's definitions of the three tests.

[ INSERT TABLE 3 ABOUT HERE ]

In the United States and United Kingdom, lawmakers raised the issue of gambling-based monetization in video games at a federal level – but not for the first time (Chalk, 2017; Good, 2017a). In 2014, legislation was passed in Singapore that was thought to cover loot box gambling, however, the legislation did not adequately cover social games or those where players could not exchange virtual currency back to real world currency (Wee, 2014). This is a common loophole for developers to avoid gambling regulations. China is the only country to successfully pass legislation targeting gambling-based microtransactions, such as loot boxes (McAloon, 2016). In response, Blizzard Entertainment, developer of *Overwatch*, changed their monetization in China to award loot boxes as a "free gift" for purchase of virtual currency (Ziebart, 2017). This could be understood by Boltanski's theories as an institution attempting a reality test to make concessions and confirm a new understanding of loot boxes, re-emphasizing that this was a gift and not gambling. These tests offer institutions the opportunity to re-establish control over reality to re-gain control of how they extract revenue from consumers while adhering to regulations. Ultimately, a reality that allows them to proceed without radically altering their monetization model. Significant is the understanding of the importance that games critique played in these shifts and the responses. Arguably, government and organizational regulation is

ineffective, but instead, developers took on the responsibility of adjusting themselves more effectively.

**Failing the Test of Loot Box Criticism**

The video game industry is currently grappling with widespread criticisms of chance-based monetization (Hussain, 2018; Kuchera, 2017; Ore, 2017). Meanwhile, developers are struggling to stand out amongst a saturated industry, and struggle to choose between economic viability and the use of controversial monetization strategies. However, the examination of these processes allows for a better understanding of developer responses and the interplay of developers, media, and critique. Ultimately, following Boltanski (2011), this commentary presents an opportunity to challenge the status quo of monetization and pave a new pathway for monetization that ideally is founded on less exploitative principles. Ideally, these critiques lead to forms of monetization that do not enact a form of exploitative 'violence,' such as monetization models where users purchase items directly for a set cost, rather than chance-based gambling. Established as exploitative by critics and consumers alike, legislation is slow-moving or unsuccessful in contending with emerging forms of virtual goods and currencies. This is further complicated by a lack of data to justify regulation. Player data collected by developers is obfuscated behind complex economic models and large, privately-owned datasets (Whitson & French, Forthcoming). Traditional forms of regulation surrounding gambling cannot be so neatly applied as the function of loot boxes remain deliberately concealed (Whitson & French, Forthcoming). Furthermore, it is shown that players report difficulty in distinguishing gambling from gaming when the two are intertwined, such as in free-to-play monetization (Albarrán-Torres & Goggin, 2014). If critiques directed at self-regulatory organizations – such as North America's ESRB or Europe's PEGI, both of which have been analyzed within *Game Studies* as in need of

improvement (see: Felini, 2015), results in a passing of the blame, then perhaps attention should be turned back towards developers.

In response to recent criticisms of loot boxes, some developers self-regulated to avoid public backlash (Cleaver, 2017; Messner, 2017). Shifts within studio practices indicate that potential solutions exist and may originate from resistance to current systems. Development studios, such as Phoenix Labs, shifted their monetization models away from loot boxes in direct response to rising discourse, requiring players to purchase items directly for a set cost (Messner, 2017). Alternatively, developer Playsaurus moved away from free-to-play models entirely, citing that they wished to avoid any ethical issues (and backlash) associated with gambling-like microtransactions (Cleaver, 2017). While they remain outliers, these decisions signal towards the potential power of discourse to affect change. Critique, if effectively utilized, acts as a corrective measure to exploitative modes of monetization. Commentary that calls for alternatives to legislation may prove more effective, especially as we see legislation in the United States and United Kingdom fail to fully address exploitative monetization. Cases of successful legislation of loot boxes are rare, which provides an opportunity for developers to self-regulate in response. Ultimately, this E3 featured many developers announcing that their games would not include loot boxes or satirizing the controversy (Farokhmanesh, 2018; Hussain, 2018).

Returning to Boltanski, critique is a necessary process and the examination of discourses and the actors that instigate these moments. Within the video game industry, publishers and development studios are the institutions that construct our reality. Through the repetitious publication of games, genres, aesthetics, and marketing materials, they construct a normative reality and routine for those who play games. This includes the construction of what is and is not an acceptable form of monetization. This process of confirmation implies a gap where symbolic

violence exists, demonstrated through an examination of the unregulated chance-based gambling models of monetization and the harm of continued convergence of gambling and gaming (King, Delfabbro, & Griffiths, 2010). The violence of development studios and publishers can be extended to the harms that stem from poor representation (of both women and marginalized groups) in games and games communities or the precarious working conditions of game developers.

The work of critical actors, in this case games critics, is vital to exposing this violence. The work of these actors is often to provoke individuals out of their routines and recognize violence (Boltanski, 2011). However, this is a difficult process for these actors, who must be able to convincingly portray these contradictions and the harm they cause. This arguably leaves their platform open to suspicion, censoring, loss of potential advertising revenue and backlash from players and an imbalance exists in power and risk between critics and corporate institutions (Boltanski, 2011). Critique plays a clear role in transforming the industry, with the case of loot box monetization within the industry causing shifts in response to commentary. These most recent critiques could lead to similar shifts, to be subsumed by capitalism, and lead to new models of monetization. The analysis of free-to-play games, and specifically exploitative loot box mechanics, will likely lead in time to new models of monetization in response. Games critics then are key in making sure those within the industry (developers and players alike) remain aware of different systems of symbolic violence.

Examining how developers historically contended with issues (and circumvented it) highlights, I hope, the importance of critique and games critics in shaping our conceptions of games, those who play games, and the labour of game developers within the video game industry. In coping with blockbuster monetization commentary and needing to increase revenue

from free-to-play models of monetization, developers turned to gambling-based monetization (loot boxes) to address the issue of offering their games for free. Briefly availing developers of criticism and the opportunity to create new games freely, this mode of monetization continues to flourish throughout the industry as new voices of resistance rise. These voices (of consumers, critics, and other developers) now encapsulate the current dispute within the industry surrounding monetization and directly signal potential shifts moving forward. Opportunities exist for the discussion and examination of how to influence industries in ways that reduce or eliminate the symbolic violence these forms of monetization pose. This moment, of which Boltanski and Chiapello detailed as key in shaping future shifts, affords the opportunity to shape the economics and, by extension, the aesthetics and genres of this media by broadcasting and talking about new alternatives that may address critiques, but also offers economic stability for developers. One such example includes the 'Battle Pass,' by *Fortnite* developer Epic Games, which is regarded as a clear case of how publishers can monetize their games successfully without loot boxes (Ashley, 2018). *Fortnite*, which was released in 2017, does not contain any form of gambling-based monetization while still generating several hundred million dollars in revenue in a single month with a 'consumer-friendly' image (Ashley, 2018; Statt, 2018).

## Conclusion

Video game developers are no strangers to shifts and transformations that alter the landscape of their creative labour and media. However, the work of tracing and interrogating economic shifts of monetization aids in exploration of future interventions when capitalist practices are determined to be exploitative of consumers. Furthermore, it may be possible to co-opt these moments of change through resistance to direct the industry's future to one that is less exploitative of consumers. Paying attention to the critical actors that drive these shifts, and the

discourse they create, is revealed to be an important area of inquiry for those interested in issues within the video game industry and communities. While consumers are often perceived to have the greatest amount of power, and certainly do possess power in their purchasing, this analysis reveals how this power may be directed and influenced through practices of critique.

The historical and contemporary tracing of shifts within monetization, emphasizing 'where' these shifts begin, offers the opportunity to explore the processes of change for the study of future economic and industry-wide shifts. In addition, I emphasize how critique and wider discourse surrounding monetization (or other similar economic factors) within industries, including the reproaches and discourse of 'everyday' individuals, such as consumers, and critics, can be effectively examined. The work of Boltanski and Chiapello show how these criticisms are subsumed by capitalistic systems and could then be potentially be co-opted for greater change. Examining how commentary functions aids in the understanding of the necessity, process, and roles that exist.

Future research could turn to the practices and responses of developers in the design and implementation of loot boxes or similarly chance-based monetization in games. The role of legislators and the insight of legal professionals on the difficulties in passing legislation on virtual objects would nuance similar analyses and provide insight into the efficacy of these movements, or on the implications of legislation for practices of production. In addition, validation of links between patterns of gambling and patterns of loot box purchasing should be more widely established through the adaption of more traditional measures from the field of gambling and psychology (see: Macey & Hamari, 2018). More generally, the use of theories of pragmatic sociology of critique could aid in the analyzing of other movements within the video game industry (or in how previous campaigns have impacted games culture more widely), with

close attention to games critics, the discourses they generate, the implications for consumers, and the responses of developers.

Critical discourse analysis arguably highlights exploitive systems and games criticism is readily available to study while the full repercussions of this work and their analyses are yet to be seen. Opportunities to utilize commentary to make corrective and radical changes to capitalism and determinedly exploitative systems should be taken with the powerful knowledge of the role critical discourse plays in these shifts. This includes discussions of who is accountable for these systems, the establishment (or requirement) of necessary data to explore the implications of these systems, and the creation of industry-wide and fairer monetization systems.

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Tables

Table 1

| **Table 1: Comparing 'Blockbuster' Monetization and 'Free-to-Play' Monetization** | | |
|---|---|---|
| | **'Blockbuster' Monetization** | **'Free-to-Play' Monetization** |
| **Forms of capital accumulation** | Single-sale, whole retail products typically sold in physical locations by 'known' developers and hardware makers. | A mixed-methods approach including freemium, premium, microtransactions, advertisement-based revenue, and blockbuster revenue generation. |
| **What is being rejected** | Proliferation and saturation of video game market with untested, untrusted developers. | Gatekeeping to game development; the separation of developer and player for use of labour and co-development; traditional modes of monetization reliant on whole products sold only once for a set price. |
| **Problems that have been identified** | Exclusivity and near-monopoly levels of difficulty to enter market due to gatekeeping; lack of purchasing options for those without the disposable income; difficulty for independent games development to emerge; cyclical development cycles with little risk taken in terms of genre and content. | Games-as-service and data-driven game development increases surveillance of players; exploitative forms of monetization; exploitation of user-generated content and labour; the rise and success of new genres, limiting possibilities of success in other genres. |
| **Solutions** | Online distribution platforms; new networked forms of working with smaller team sizes; introduction of monetization models with either low or no initial purchasing fees. | Community management to build player engagement, including spectatorship;; generation of revenue in the viewership and spectacle surrounding a game rather than in the product itself over a sustainable amount of time. |

Table 2

| **Table 2: Free-to-play (F2P) monetization models** | |
|---|---|
| **Monetization Method** | **Description** |
| 1) ‘Premium’ | Users pay per download for full product, most like the ‘blockbuster’ model of triple-A development. |
| 2) ‘Freemium’ | Users download the initial product for free and pay later for a full, ‘unlocked’ version, similar to ‘shareware.’ |
| 3) Advertising Supported | Users download the product for free, but gameplay is interrupted by the presence of advertising. In some cases, users can pay an extra fee to remove advertisements (upgrading to a ‘freemium’ model). |
| 4) Subscription Model | Users download the game for free, typically, but must pay a fee over a set period (typically every month) to have continued access to the game. |
| 5) Microtransactions | Users download the game for free but have the option to purchase additional content or virtual items within the game. |
| Source: Adapted from Nieborg (2016) | |

Table 3

| **Table 3: Tests and Industry Responses** | | |
|---|---|---|
| **Test Name** | **Definition of Test** | **Example** |
| **Truth Tests** | Carried out by institutions to re-affirm and stabilize the gap between the status quo and reality, mainly through a repetitive structure that establishes reality as normative and fair. | Developer introduces a new premium blockbuster game with no microtransactions, continuing the status quo. |
| **Reality Tests** | Explores the gap between the status quo and lived experience of individuals allowing for an acceptance of this gap or concessions on the part of institutions to reduce it. | Developer introduces a new premium blockbuster game heavily reliant on microtransactions, challenging the understanding of what a premium game looks like and must attempt to reconcile this with consumers by making concessions |
| **Existential Tests** | Radically seek to undo the relationship between what is accepted and what is experienced by others by revealing previously invisible violence or exploitation. | Developer receives a massive amount of critique and must justify, explain, and correct their methods while having revealed the exploitative nature of monetization more generally |
| Source: Adapted from Boltanski (2011) and Author | | |