

Fairness in Video Games

a Discourse Analysis of Game Media's Standpoint about
the Loot Box Controversy in *Star Wars: Battlefront 2*

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Summary

The goal of this research is to gain additional insights into the loot box controversy by analyzing the discourse used by game journalists and gamers on loot boxes in video games. The research question is: What is the discourse used by game media on loot boxes in the video games *Star Wars: Battlefront 2*? To answer the question, I will make use of a *critical discourse analysis* around the discourse on loot boxes in *Star Wars: Battlefront 2*. This game sparked controversy because of the way loot boxes were implemented in the game. It also became controversial because it started a debate about gambling in video games since loot boxes are an example of a gamblified element in games. While mainstream media debate whether gambling in games should be prohibited, game media are more interested in how these gambling elements are implemented in games. Van Dijk's method for a critical discourse analysis will be applied to analyze the discourse used in several articles and comments on articles by game media on the subject. The research will show that for game media, the debate about gambling in video games is trivial compared to the discussion about fairness in video games. Fairness is a subjective concept and has different forms; we learn that fairness in gameplay is very different from fairness in game economics. And even within gameplay and game economics there are several kinds of fairness. However, the analysis will show that the consensus is that video games like *Star Wars: Battlefront 2* are unfair with their current implementation of loot boxes. Publishers might have to change the business strategies that use these gamblified elements to tranquillize the friction between the publishers and their clients.

Table of Contents

1. Introduction: The loot box controversy	7
2. The two debates	9
2.1 The ambiguous definition of gambling in video games.....	9
2.2. The ambiguous use of loot boxes in video games.....	12
3. Theoretical Framework: Fairness in video games	14
3.1 Fairness in gameplay.....	14
3.1.1 Categories of play.....	15
3.1.2 Success versus failure.....	17
3.2 Fairness in game economics.....	19
4. Method	23
4.1 Corpus Selection	23
4.2 Critical Discourse Analysis.....	25
5. Analysis.....	28
5.1 Skill > labor > chance	30
5.2 Pay-to-win	31
5.3 Completionism	33
5.4 Implementation of the microtransaction system as revenue model	34
6. Conclusion	36
Bibliography	37
Appendix.....	43

1. Introduction: The loot box controversy

In November 2017, *Star Wars: Battlefront 2* (Electronic Arts, 2017) was set to launch. However, prior to launch, the addition of loot boxes to the game stirred up so much controversy, that one day before the launch microtransactions were stripped out of the game completely. Never before had the gaming community shown this amount of resentment towards the loot box system.

Mainstream media also picked up the controversy and the attention made government agencies aware of loot box systems. This resulted on April the 19th in a declaration by the Dutch gaming authority wherein they stated that some loot boxes are, in fact, gambling.¹ This stirred up commotion since some of the games that contain loot boxes have a vast underaged player base and minors are not allowed to gamble.

Loot boxes are consumable virtual items which can be redeemed to receive a randomized selection of further virtual items. First introduced in 2007,² the virtual items a player can 'win' by buying these loot boxes can be cosmetic, meaning that they offer basic customization options for a player's avatar (their in-game character) or other looks (skins) for items like weapons.³ Loot boxes can also contain assets that provide an in-game advantage, helping the player progress more effectively in the game. This could be in the form of better weapons or skillpoints needed to level up your character.⁴

What is interesting about the media coverage of the loot box controversy is that there are two different debates. The mainstream media question whether a loot box can be considered gambling and if that makes a video game a gambling phenomenon. The game media, on the other hand, mostly report and discuss the fairness of loot boxes and not so much whether they can be considered gambling. What appears to be one controversy, are actually two different debates concerning different stakeholders.

¹ Kansspelautoriteit. *Onderzoek Naar Loot Boxes Een Buit of Een Last?* April 19, 2018. Accessed December 11, 2018. <https://kansspelautoriteit.nl/onderwerpen/a-z/loot-boxes/onderzoek/>.

² Hood, Vic. "Are Loot Boxes Gambling?". Accessed June 1. *Eurogamer.net*, December 10, 2017. <http://www.eurogamer.net/articles/2017-10-11-are-loot-boxes-gambling>.

³ Avard, Alex. "Video Games Have a Loot Box Fetish, and It's Starting to Harm the Way We Play." *Gamesradar*. GamesRadar The Games, Movies and TV You Love, October 10, 2017. <http://www.gamesradar.com/loot-boxes-shadow-of-war/>.

⁴ "Loot Box." *Wikipedia*. Wikimedia Foundation, March 16, 2018. https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Loot_box.

Psychologist Mark Griffiths writes that the definition of gambling is the re-allocation of wealth (money or something else of financial value) without the introduction of productive work on either side.⁵ Gamers dislike games other players can buy an advantage they have not earned.⁶ This intrigued me; if game media are less interested in how the law defines gambling, but do call for some sort of regulation on the implementations of loot boxes, then how do they perceive the border between a gamblified element that enhances a game and one that ruins it? And what does that tell us about the discourse around gambling in games in general? Since the legal-focused debate in the mainstream media is quite straightforward this thesis and research will mostly focus on the debate within the game media. Findings concerning the discourse around gambling and gaming in mainstream media will be used to reflect on the researched findings around this topic in game media. Within game media, the boundary between gambling and gaming appears to have mostly to do with fairness. Therefore, my question is: **What is the discourse used by game media on loot boxes in the video game *Star Wars: Battlefront 2*?**

⁵ Griffiths, "Is The Buying Of Loot Boxes In Video Games A Form Of Gambling Or Gaming?". 53.

⁶ Kuchera, Ben. "Loot Boxes Are the Video Game Issue of the Year." *Polygon*. Polygon, December 14, 2017. <https://www.polygon.com/2017-best-games/2017/12/14/16772900/loot-boxes-loot-crates-2017>.

2. The two debates

2.1 The ambiguous definition of gambling in video games

The mainstream media focus on the psychological and legal side of the debate, mainly whether a loot box can be considered gambling following the legal criteria. In a paper published by the Gambling Commission in March 2017, it is stated that loot boxes are not gambling because the virtual items you can retrieve from them offer no real-life value. Nevertheless, when a third-party website lets players trade and sell these virtual items, the Gambling Commission states that loot boxes *are* a form of gambling.⁷ The question government agencies seem to struggle with is whether a loot box can also be considered gambling if the items retrieved from it are only virtual.

For the law, virtual items do not have real-life value at this moment. Brett Abarbanel adds to this that “the Commission is accurately doing its job in interpreting the set regulation within the scope of the law.”⁸ Confirming that according to the law loot boxes are indeed not gambling. Vic Hood, game journalist at Eurogamer.net, states that “perhaps in this case, the law is struggling to keep pace with technology.”⁹

According to psychologist Mark Griffiths, professor of Behavioral Addiction, loot boxes can be considered gambling because players use real money to buy virtual in-game items that have an outcome based on a chance selection.¹⁰ Keith Whyte, executive director of the National Council on Problem Gambling agrees: “Intermittent variable reinforcement is the means of delivering rewards that is the most exciting to the human brain. It is the fundamental basis to slot

⁷ “Virtual Currencies, ESports and Social Gaming – Discussion Paper.” Gambling Commission, August 2016. <http://live-gamblecom.cloud.contensis.com/PDF/Virtual-currencies-eSports-and-social-gaming-discussion-paper.pdf>

⁸ Abarbanel, Brett, Gambling vs. Gaming: A Commentary on the Role of Regulatory, Industry, and Community Stakeholders in the Loot Box Debate (February 25, 2018). Available at SSRN: <https://ssrn.com/abstract=3129811> or <http://dx.doi.org/10.2139/ssrn.3129811>

⁹ Hood, Vic. “Are Loot Boxes Gambling?”. Accessed June 1. *Eurogamer.net*, December 10, 2017. <http://www.eurogamer.net/articles/2017-10-11-are-loot-boxes-gambling>.

¹⁰ Griffiths, Mark D. “Is The Buying Of Loot Boxes In Video Games A Form Of Gambling Or Gaming?” *Gaming Law Review*22, no. 1 (February 1, 2018): 52–54. doi:10.1089/qlr2.2018.2216.

machines. It is the fundamental basis to loot boxes. There is no distinction.”¹¹ This shows that from the gambling perspective, loot boxes are classified as gambling.

The general view on gambling in the West has a negative connotation, and mainstream media seem to follow this. To illustrate this, I would like to refer to Sutton-Smith’s book *The Ambiguity of Play*. Herein he states that gambling rhetoric have been disapproving for years in the West.¹² He also refers to “the generally negative attitude toward gamblers that has been a part of the past several centuries and that dominates most literature on games of chance or gambling.”¹³

Besides gambling, gaming generally regarded negatively too. Over the past years, disputes have arisen discussing the connection of gaming with addiction, violence and social relations.¹⁴ Games are often seen as the culprit of social problems. When games are associated with gambling too, even more negative consequences for the games industry could arise. Especially because many people see games as something for children which are not supposed to gamble.¹⁵

That mainstream media consider games to be for children becomes clear as soon as you read the title of the most popular article about gambling in games on the Daily Mail website: “Video game ‘loot boxes’ that use the same tactics as casinos to part people with their money are encouraging children as young as 13 to GAMBLE”.¹⁶ Another example of that viewpoint can be found in the Washington Post:

¹¹ Bailey, Jason M. 2018. “A Video Game 'Loot Box' Offers Coveted Rewards, but Is It Gambling?” The New York Times. The New York Times. April 24. <https://www.nytimes.com/2018/04/24/business/loot-boxes-video-games.html>.

¹² Sutton-Smith, B. (2009). *The ambiguity of play*. Harvard University Press. 69.

¹³ Sutton-Smith, 65.

¹⁴ Sedee, Menno. 2017. “Is Gamen Schadelijk?” NRC. NRC. November 21. <https://www.nrc.nl/nieuws/2017/11/21/is-gamen-schadelijk-14058313-a1582024>.

¹⁵ Shapiro, Jordan. 2014. “A Surprising New Study On How Video Games Impact Children.” Forbes. Forbes Magazine. August 27. <https://www.forbes.com/consent/?toURL=https://www.forbes.com/sites/jordanshapiro/2014/08/27/a-surprising-new-study-on-how-video-games-impact-children/>.

¹⁶ Tim Collins. "Video Game 'loot Boxes' That Use the Same Tactics as Casinos to Part People with Their Money Are Encouraging Children as Young as 13 to GAMBLE." Daily Mail Online. June 18, 2018. Accessed June 20, 2018. <http://www.dailymail.co.uk/sciencetech/article-5857051/Games-loot-boxes-expose-youth-gambling.html>.

Now imagine playing your friend who spent \$200 for the random chance that his pawns obtain the board-clearing powers of a queen. Plus his king looks like Darth Vader. [...] You might get mad. Or you might up the ante and spend a few hundred bucks to even the odds. Now imagine that you're both children.¹⁷

Here, Park tries to help their readers visualize what the problem with loot boxes is: paying extra for microtransactions that make the balance between chance and skill seem unfair. The thought of children encountering these 'aggressive' tactics is why people became concerned about gambling in games. But since the law does not define loot boxes as gambling and most countries will not regulate the use of them in games, the debate in mainstream media continues.¹⁸

¹⁷ Park, Gene. "How a Star Wars Video Game Faced Charges That It Was Promoting Gambling." The Washington Post. November 18, 2017. Accessed June 20, 2018. https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/comic-riffs/wp/2017/11/18/how-a-star-wars-video-game-faced-charges-that-it-was-promoting-gambling/?noredirect=on&utm_term=.29f3c08611ed.

¹⁸ Arif, Shabana. 2018. "The Netherlands Starts Enforcing Its Loot Box Ban - IGN." IGN Boards. IGN. June 20. <https://www.ign.com/articles/2018/06/20/the-netherlands-starts-enforcing-its-loot-box-ban>.

2.2. The ambiguous use of loot boxes in video games

Next to the mainstream media's loot box debate, there is the debate within the game media. The game media focus mostly on the implementation of loot boxes instead of the legal aspects. As Ben Kuchera, writer for *Polygon* states: "Players don't hate loot boxes, they hate BAD loot boxes."¹⁹ Gamers do not per se disagree with loot boxes in games overall, but they do disagree with them when they provide unfair advantages or when the game design pushes them to paying for microtransactions.²⁰ The debate in the game media is about *fairness*.

New opportunities such as the changing business model of the games industry and new technological capabilities resulted in a cross-over between gambling and gaming products, labelled *digital convergence*.²¹ According to King et al., the most important aspects of the convergence are the introduction of gambling elements in games on social media and the *gamblification* of non-gambling games, in which players can win items of value.²² Loot boxes are an example of gamblification, as they 'gamblify' gaming progress or acquisition of virtual items. Game media mostly acknowledge the gambling aspect of loot boxes when writing about microtransactions.²³ However, since games are not for children and gamers are adults²⁴, they should be allowed to gamble if they want to and gamblification is not seen as a problem. In fact, loot boxes already were considered gambling by game scholars because of the design that resembles slot machines and because some facilitate actual gambling practices.²⁵

¹⁹ Kuchera, Ben. "Loot Boxes Are the Video Game Issue of the Year." *Polygon*. Polygon, December 14, 2017. <https://www.polygon.com/2017-best-games/2017/12/14/16772900/loot-boxes-loot-crates-2017>.

²⁰ Kuchera.

²¹ King, D., Delfabbro, P., & Griffiths, M. (2010). The Convergence of Gambling and Digital Media: Implications for Gambling in Young People. *Journal of Gambling Studies*, 26(2), 175–187. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10899-009-9153-9>

²² King, Daniel L., Sally M. Gainsbury, Paul H. Delfabbro, Nerilee Hing, and Brett Abarbanel. "Distinguishing between Gaming and Gambling Activities in Addiction Research." *Journal of Behavioral Addictions*, no. 4 (December 21, 2015): 215–20. doi:10.1556/2006.4.2015.045.

²³ Good, Owen S. 2017. "I Spent \$90 in Battlefront 2, and I Still Don't Have Any Control over My Characters." *Polygon*. Polygon. November 16. <https://www.polygon.com/2017/11/16/16658476/star-wars-battlefront-2-loot-crate-costs-analysis>.

²⁴ "Video Games / What Do You Mean Its Not For Kids." 2018. TV Tropes. Accessed September 27. <https://tvtropes.org/pmwiki/pmwiki.php/WhatDoYouMeanItsNotForKids/VideoGames>.

²⁵ Koeder, Marco Josef; Tanaka, Ema (2017): Game of chance elements in free-to-play mobile games. A freemium business model monetization tool in need of selfregulation?, 28th European Regional Conference of the International Telecommunications Society (ITS): "Competition and Regulation in the Information Age", Passau, Germany, July 30 - August 2, 2017, International Telecommunications Society (ITS), Passau. 3.

The gamblification is not the problem for gamers but the implementation of these gamblified elements is. There are a lot of games where you can play and finish the game without buying a loot box, but for gamers the idea of spending even more money on a game you already bought, to boost your performance, is something that arouses unpleasant feelings.²⁶ Furthermore, they think that implementation of loot boxes makes games boring.²⁷ Game journalist Paul Tassi writes: “There is a difference between a game that is annoying because loot boxes are in it, and a game that is ravaged by loot boxes being integrated into the core of its gameplay, and selling straight-up power advantages.”²⁸ This shows that this debate is about two types of fairness unfairness: having to pay more for something than expected and gaining undeserved advantages.

²⁶ Horti, Samuel. “How the Loot Box Controversy Shaped Gaming in 2017.” *Pcgamer*. PC Gamer, December 21, 2017. <https://www.pcgamer.com/how-the-loot-box-controversy-shaped-gaming-in-2017/>.

²⁷ Lahti, Evan. “The Real Reason Shadow of War's Loot Boxes Are Bad: They Make the Game Boring.” *Pcgamer*. PC Gamer THE GLOBAL AUTHORITY ON PC GAMES, October 18, 2017. <https://www.pcgamer.com/the-real-reason-shadow-of-wars-loot-boxes-are-bad-they-make-the-game-boring/>.

²⁸ Tassi, Paul. 2017. “Activision Is Doing Loot Boxes Right, EA Is Doing Them Horribly Wrong.” *Forbes*. Forbes Magazine. November 16. <https://www.forbes.com/sites/insertcoin/2017/11/14/activision-is-doing-loot-boxes-right-ea-is-doing-them-horribly-wrong/#4a48c1643b24>.

3. Theoretical Framework: Fairness in video games

Fairness can be experienced within the game itself and in circumstances surrounding a game. The framework will therefore be up into two subsections: fairness in gameplay and fairness in game economics.

3.1 Fairness in gameplay

According to the Cambridge Dictionary, *fairness* is “the quality of treating people equally or in a way that is right or reasonable”.²⁹ We can understand this as a game which is not biased towards any player. However, in video games this can be ambiguous, as fairness can have several possible meanings.³⁰ For example, *Mario Kart* (Nintendo, 2017) is known for using “active cheating to help poorer players catch up to better ones and keep the races close.”³¹ This game aims for *fairness in outcome*, by offering all players a chance to win the game. That clearly makes the game biased to the poorer players. Fairness in gameplay hugely depends on the kind of game you are playing, and the set rules within the boundaries of that game. Thus, to understand the different kinds of fairness in gameplay, we need to distinguish the different kinds of categories of play first.

²⁹ "FAIRNESS | Meaning in the Cambridge English Dictionary." Cambridge Dictionary. Accessed December 11, 2018. <https://dictionary.cambridge.org/dictionary/english/fairness>.

³⁰ Juul, J. *The Art of Failure : An Essay on the Pain of Playing Video Games*. 2013. Cambridge: MIT Press. Accessed October 27, 2018. ProQuest Ebook Central. 79.

³¹ Kelly, Adhg. "Fairness Is a Perception [Game Psychology]." *What Games Are*. April 19, 2011. Accessed December 11, 2018. <https://www.whatgamesare.com/2011/04/fairness-is-a-perception-game-psychology-1.html>.

3.1.1 Categories of play

In 1955, Roger Caillois was the first one to describe various categories of play; distinguishing competition (*agon*) and chance (*alea*). He continued the work of Johan Huizinga, who wrote *Homo Ludens* in 1933, a book about the definition of ‘play’.³² Caillois stated that you can play games in each category (almost) without any rules (*paida*) or by using a lot of set rules (*ludus*) and anything in between (see figure 1). Caillois also defined *mimicry* and *ilinx*. Though mimicry (pretense) is part of the gameplay too (the player acts as the game character) it has nothing to do with fairness as there is no quantifiable outcome of pretense. Therefore, I will not elaborate on this category of play.

TABLE I

	AG ÔN (competition)	ALEA (chance)	MIM- ICRY (pretense)	ILINX (vertigo)
PAIDIA ↑ noise agitation laughter dance hoop solitaire games of patience cross-word puzzles ↓ LUDUS	races combats etc. athletics } not regulated	<i>comptines</i> heads or tails betting roulette lotteries, compound- ed or par- layed	childish imita- tion masks costumes theatre	children’s swings merry-go- round teeter-totter waltz outdoor sports skiing mountain- climbing

NOTE: In each vertical column, the games are classified very approximately in such order that the *paidia* element constantly decreases while the *ludus* element constantly increases.

Figure 1: Categories of games by Roger Caillois³³

³² Huizinga, J. (1955, originally published in 1938). *Homo Ludens: A Study of the Play Element in Culture*. Beacon Press, Boston.

³³ Caillois, Roger, and Elaine P. Halperin. 1955. “The Structure and Classification of Games.” *Diogenes* 3 (12). 64. doi:10.1177/039219215500301204.

Caillois states that ‘the practice of agon presupposes concentration, appropriate training, assiduous effort and the will to win.’³⁴ Alea, on the other hand, does not require anything from the player except wanting to win the game. Games focused on alea are based upon an external inequality that the player cannot influence. A winner is not the best player, but the luckiest. The player is passive and all he has to do is depend on fate.³⁵ Because of the different natures of these kinds of play, we can assume fairness within these games also differs.

Nowadays game scholars like to distinguish alea and agon as games of chance versus games of skill. More recently game scholars recognized a third category of play besides skill (agon) and chance (alea): games of labor. Instead of being rewarded for skill or luck, players are rewarded for executing repetitive tasks.³⁶ In most games, a combination of skill, chance and labor is needed to complete the game.³⁷ Juul writes about fairness within these categories:

We can ask which path to success is more fair, but this reveals that fairness has several possible meanings. Games of chance are “fair” in that they promise all players an equal chance of winning; games of skill are “fair” in that they justly reward personal skills; games of labor are “fair” in that they promise equal outcomes according to time invested.³⁸

This shows that the three different categories of play are also three different kinds of fairness in video games.³⁹

³⁴ Caillois, Roger, and Elaine P. Halperin. “The Structure and Classification of Games.” *Diogenes* 3, no. 12 (September 1955): 66. doi:10.1177/039219215500301204.

³⁵ Caillois and Halperin, 66.

³⁶ Clark, Naomi. “A Fantasy of Labor.” Paper presented at Games for Change, New York, May 26, 2010.

³⁷ Juul, J. *The Art of Failure: An Essay on the Pain of Playing Video Games*. 2013. Cambridge: MIT Press. Accessed October 27, 2018. ProQuest Ebook Central. 72.

³⁸ Juul, 79.

³⁹ Juul, 74.

3.1.2 Success versus failure

When playing a game of any category of play, we want to succeed in that game. A fair game would provide you with the means necessary to succeed and therefore a game is fair when every player can complete it.⁴⁰ Failure to complete the game can therefore easily be perceived as unfair. According to Juul, there has been a change in the way fairness in video games has been perceived over the years.⁴¹ Early arcade games could not be completed at all, but during the 80's and 90's an increasing number of games got reachable endings. Commercial videogames now mostly promise that any player can complete them.⁴² This shows that the idea of what a fair game is has changed over the years and that fairness is not an absolute.

As explained before, we now distinguish three types of fairness in video games; skill, change and labor. To succeed in a game of skill, the player must improve his range of skills to make progress.⁴³ In case of failure, the player can learn from his mistakes, get better and try again. This learning curve is like learning through failure in real-life and games of skill are therefore associate with learning.⁴⁴ A game of skill is fair because it rewards players that perform better.⁴⁵

To succeed in a game of labor the player has to perform routine tasks for several shorter session stretched out over a longer period of time to gradually gain more abilities/items and the task 'are mostly trivial and rarely end in failure.'⁴⁶ In a game that is purely a game of labor there is no failure as your only options are to succeed or not-having-succeeded-yet (but will succeed the moment enough time is invested).⁴⁷ A game of labor lacks self-improvement and are seen as repugnant by players who value the learning curve in games.⁴⁸ A game of labor is fair because players who invest the same amount of time get the same outcome.⁴⁹

⁴⁰ Juul, J. *The Art of Failure: An Essay on the Pain of Playing Video Games*. 2013. Cambridge: MIT Press. Accessed October 27, 2018. ProQuest Ebook Central. 29.

⁴¹ Juul, 29.

⁴² Juul, 29.

⁴³ Juul, 74.

⁴⁴ Juul, 74.

⁴⁵ Juul, 80-81

⁴⁶ Juul, 74-77.

⁴⁷ Juul, 77.

⁴⁸ Juul, 79.

⁴⁹ Juul, 79.

To succeed in a game of chance, you have to be lucky. Failure is achieved when a player is unlucky; an unwanted trait.⁵⁰ A game of chance is fair because it has equal distribution when considered over multiple game sessions.⁵¹ It is also fair in the sense that all players can succeed, even when skill or time investment differ.

For every category of play there are different ways for the player to succeed, and all these ways of playing the game are fair in their own way. Yet, games of chance are often called ‘unfair’. Sutton-Smith argues that play and theories about play have ideological underpinnings that greatly differ.⁵² For example, he writes:

Fate, with its emphasis on luck rather than talent, is the antithesis to the rhetoric progress. [...] The rhetoric of gambling has been a solidly negative rhetoric of avoidance for the past several hundred years in the West.⁵³

He shows that within popular western discourses games of chance have been viewed negatively. This might be because they are compared with different kinds of fairness of different categories of play (skill and labor). It could also have to do something with the negative connotations that games of chance have (being unlucky is an unwanted trait) and the positive connotation that games of skill (learning) and labor (investing equal amounts of time) have.

In conclusion, there are several categories of games. A game is fair when it is possible for a player to succeed in it. To succeed means something different in each category, which is why fairness is also reliant to the category of the game. Games of chance are more controversial than games of skill and games of labor, because of their relation to gambling and because players have less influence on the outcome.

⁵⁰ Juul, J. *The Art of Failure: An Essay on the Pain of Playing Video Games*. 2013. Cambridge: MIT Press. Accessed October 27, 2018. ProQuest Ebook Central. 75.

⁵¹ Juul, 81.

⁵² Sutton-Smith, Brian. *The Ambiguity of Play*. Harvard University Press, 2001. 1.

⁵³ Sutton-Smith, 69.

3.2 Fairness in game economics

To understand the economics behind video games as they are now, it is important to consider the history of video games and the changes in the revenue model. In 1961 *Spacewar* was created by Steve Russell, which can be considered the first video game.⁵⁴ From there on, video games started out as arcade games. The revenue model was simple: vendors bought the arcade machine directly from the manufacturer and earned money by making players pay 25 cents per play.⁵⁵ Games were a service.

The model changed when the first home console was released in 1972: the Magnavox *Odyssey*.⁵⁶ The *Odyssey* could only play the games already built into the system and therefore the revenue model was to sell the console itself.⁵⁷ From the 70's onwards games became the selling products instead of only making money from selling the console: companies started making money from selling separate games.⁵⁸ Games were products.

During the 80's game publishers changed tactics trying to survive or overcome the video game crash and new versions of existing games that were in demand and as sequels were being sold, as well as branded tie-in games that borrowed elements from popular media such as *Star Wars*.⁵⁹

The revenue model changed again after 2001 as publishers started to rely more on the sale of expansions⁶⁰ Consoles had become more expensive to make and companies relied solely on game sale, often even selling the system at a financial loss.⁶¹ Expansions ensured further software sales for successful games.⁶²

⁵⁴ Kent, Steven L. *The Ultimate History of Video Games*. Vol. 2. New York: Three Rivers Press, 2010. 11

⁵⁵ Kent, 12.

⁵⁶ Kent, 13.

⁵⁷ Wolf, Mark J. P. *Before the Crash: Early Video Game History*. Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 2012. 54-59

⁵⁸ Sotamaa, Olli, and Jaakko Stenros. *Understanding the Range of Player Services*. Report no. 2. DEPARTMENT OF INFORMATION STUDIES AND INTERACTIVE MEDIA, University of Tampere. 11.

⁵⁹ Sotamaa and Stenros, 11.

⁶⁰ Lizardi, Ryan. "DLC: Perpetual Commodification of the Video Game." *Democratic Communiqué* 25, no. 1 (2012): 33-45. Accessed December 11, 2018. <http://journals.fcla.edu/demcom/article/view/78739/76133>. 34.

⁶¹ Dyer-Witthford, Nick, and de Peuter, Greig. 2009. *Games of Empire : Global Capitalism and Video Games*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press. Accessed December 10, 2018. ProQuest Ebook Central. 78

⁶² Lizardi, Ryan. "DLC: Perpetual Commodification of the Video Game." *Democratic Communiqué* 25, no. 1 (2012): 33-45. Accessed December 11, 2018. <http://journals.fcla.edu/demcom/article/view/78739/76133>. 35

The revenue model changed drastically in 2005 with the seventh generation of consoles, since they were connected to the internet. Instead of a physical product, players could download the software. It also became easier to add DLC's (extra downloadable content), game-patches and subscriptions fees. Games became a service again.⁶³

The 'games as a service' receive a continued monetized stream of new content over time to ensure that players keep playing and paying. The new released game content is mostly hidden behind small payments, microtransactions.⁶⁴ This can be anything from skins that only change appearances to in-game advantages such as better weapons or new areas.

Though games as product or a game as service sounds like two different things, it remains unclear if that is actually the case. As Stenros and Sotamaa state: "It is debatable whether games themselves have changed, or whether it is simply the marketing of games that has undergone a shift,"⁶⁵ meaning that 'new' extra content for a game might have been part of the initially bought game, had it been produced in the era of games as product. Certain aspects of a complete game are purposefully left out to capitalize on later. Lizardi explains this as a 'cyclical commodity' because players are continually returning to a product and pay multiple times for that product.⁶⁶ He also argues that online games force players to pay more for game expansions by peer pressure, ideas of fandom and a need for completion even when the DLC is not necessary for the narrative.⁶⁷ Lizardi states that "the product purchased initially was already inherently incomplete, and it was knowingly sold that way,"⁶⁸ Selling incomplete product to ensure later further sales could be seen as an unfair practice.

Game economics can also be seen as unfair because of psychological 'tricks'. Various studies have confirmed that microtransactions use technology to persuade people to change their

⁶³ Sotamaa, Olli, and Jaakko Stenros. *Understanding the Range of Player Services*. Report no. 2. DEPARTMENT OF INFORMATION STUDIES AND INTERACTIVE MEDIA, University of Tampere. 12.

⁶⁴ Bagga, Atul. "Emerging Trends In Games-as-a-Service." Lecture, GDC 2011, San Francisco, October 10, 2018.

⁶⁵ Sotamaa and Stenros, 12.

⁶⁶ Lizardi, Ryan. "DLC: Perpetual Commodification of the Video Game." *Democratic Communiqué* 25, no. 1 (2012): 33-45. Accessed December 11, 2018. <http://journals.fcla.edu/demcom/article/view/78739/76133>. 37

⁶⁷ Lizardi, 39.

⁶⁸ Lizardi, 40.

behavior, linking game design, persuasive technology and marketing.^{69 70 71 72} Loot boxes are designed with reward schedules that are very similar to the ones used in slot machines what can be addictive and problematic.⁷³

Another issue that rises when games sold as service is the issue with ownership. Rifkin argues that “present-day customers may no more seek so much ownership of material goods but they are buying access to segments of experience.”⁷⁴ For example: when a digital copy of a game is bought it is almost never possible to resell this game, especially not when additional content is also purchased.⁷⁵ Instead of paying for a product, a player pays for a license to download the product without owning it. Playstation’s terms of service state “We reserve the right to change or withdraw features, specifications, prices, services and content at any time, without notice to you.”⁷⁶ This can be perceived as unfair since normally a product cannot be taken away from you after paying for it.

To conclude this chapter, both gameplay and game economics can be perceived as ‘fair’. In gameplay, fairness itself can have different meanings depending on the game’s category of

⁶⁹ Fogg, B. (2003). *Persuasive technology: using computers to change what we think and do*. Morgan Kaufmann Publishers, Boston.

⁷⁰ Guo, Y., & Barnes, S. (2007). Why People Buy Virtual Items in Virtual Worlds With Real Money. *SIGMIS Database*, 38(4), 69-76.

⁷¹ Lehdonvirta, V. (2005). Real-Money Trade of Virtual Assets: Ten Different User Perceptions. In *Proceedings of Digital Arts and Culture (DAC 2005)*. Copenhagen, Denmark, December 1-3, pp. 52-58.

⁷² Lehdonvirta, V., Wilska, T. A., & Johnson, M. (2009). Virtual consumerism: case habbo hotel. *Information, communication & society*, 12(7), 1059-1079.

⁷³ Heather Alexandra, Loot Boxes Are Designed to Exploit Us, KOTAKU (Oct. 13, 2017), <https://kotaku.com/loot-boxes-are-designed-to-exploit-us-1819457592> (last visited Oct 19, 2017); Nathan Lawrence, The Troubling Psychology of Pay-to-Loot Systems, IGN (Apr. 23, 2017), <http://uk.ign.com/articles/2017/04/24/the-troubling-psychology-of-pay-to-loot-systems> (last visited Oct 19, 2017); Matthew Perks, Limited Edition Loot Boxes: Problematic Gambling and Monetization, CUBE (Oct. 11, 2016), <https://medium.com/the-cube/limitededition-loot-boxes-problematic-gambling-and-monetization-756819f2c54f> (last visited Oct. 19, 2017); Alex Wiltshire, Behind the Addictive Psychology and Seductive Art of Loot Boxes, PC GAMER (Sept. 29, 2017), <http://www.pcgamer.com/behind-the-addictive-psychology-and-seductive-art-of-loot-boxes/> (last visited Oct. 19, 2017).

⁷⁴ Rifkin, Jeremy. *The Age of Access: The New Culture of Hypercapitalism, Where All of Life Is a Paid-for Experience*. New York, NY: Jeremy P. Tarcher/Putnam, 2001. 14.

⁷⁵ Lizardi, Ryan. "DLC: Perpetual Commodification of the Video Game." *Democratic Communiqué* 25, no. 1 (2012): 33-45. Accessed December 11, 2018. <http://journals.fcla.edu/demcom/article/view/78739/76133>. 37.

⁷⁶ "Terms of Service and User Agreement." PlayStation. Accessed December 11, 2018. <https://www.playstation.com/en-us/network/legal/terms-of-service/>.

play. Games of skill wherein luck and labor have less impact are often perceived as the most 'fair' in popular discourse, though a different kind of fairness can also be found in games of labor and games of luck. In game economics, we can distinguish two problems when it comes to fairness; incompleteness and ownership. Publishers prevent players from owning a complete game and trick them into spending more money to access everything a game has to offer. Furthermore, buying a game (digitally) does not guarantee unlimited access to a game as the buyer does not become the owner. This seems unfair.

4. Method

4.1 Corpus Selection

I will select several articles that have appeared on game media using four criteria. Firstly, the article must have appeared on one of the top 3 game media websites as derived from the *eBizMBA Rank*. These websites are the most representative websites for the popular discourse within game media since they have the most unique visitors. This is a continually updated list based on an average of the *Alexa Global Traffic Rank* plus the *Compete* and *Quantcast* traffic.⁷⁷ The three most popular game media websites during my research were *IGN*, *GameSpot* and *Kotaku*. *IGN* has 20,500,000 unique monthly visitors, *GameSpot* has 15,000,000 unique monthly visitors and *Kotaku* has 10,000,000 unique monthly visitors.⁷⁸ With a total of 45,500,000 unique visitors these sites can be considered representable for the popular game media discourse.

Secondly, I will select my corpus out of the three most popular articles on each website based on the search terms ‘loot boxes’ and ‘*SW:BF2*’ within the period of November 2017 to June 2018. I choose the most read articles because that means that they are the most significant for this discourse. In total this corpus has 9 articles and 1986 comments. I will analyze the discourse around fairness in games and loot boxes are an important aspect of this. Since discourse is ever changing and evolving, the limitation in publishing dates will provide an outcome of the discourse as it was in the half year after the loot box incident with *SW:BF2*, when the discussion reached its peak within the media (see figure 2).

⁷⁷ “Top 15 Most Popular Video Game Websites | July 2017.” *Top 15 Most Popular Video Game Websites | July 2017*, July 2017. <http://www.ebizmba.com/articles/video-game-websites>.

⁷⁸ *Ibidem*.

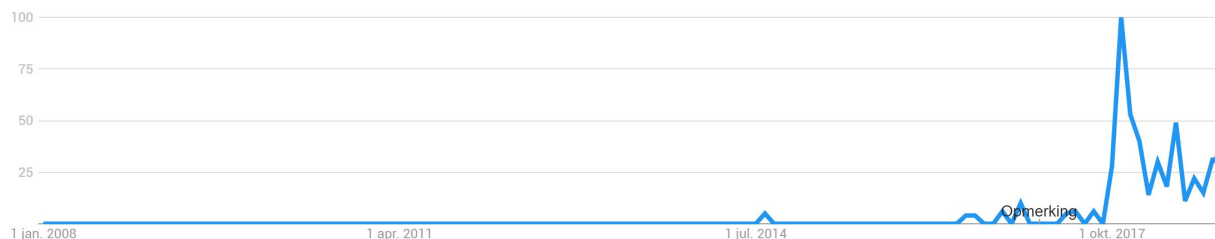


Figure 2: Google Trend graph for newsarticles containing the word 'loot boxes' in the period January 1st 2008 to October 18th 2018 ⁷⁹

Thirdly, the selected articles specifically must be relevant for my thesis by discussing fairness in video games. Therefore, game reviews that only judge the quality of the game will be excluded.

Finally, I will also include the comments on these articles in my analysis. Many game media, such as Kotaku, actively call for commenters to give their opinion and even let the journalists have discussions with them in the comment sections. This is relevant because discourse is often defined as a communicative event.⁸⁰ To fully understand the popular discourse it is important to not only look at the polished articles but also at the comments to determine how journalists relate to the discourse and elaborate on it. To keep the focus of this research on game media I will analyze comment threads in which the writers of the articles also participate. Based on this criterion, around 120 comments were analyzed. The corpus of 9 articles and 120 comments has been used to examine the discourse on fairness in video games in game media.

⁷⁹ Screenshot of Google Trends. Digital image. Google Trends. Accessed October 18, 2018. [https://trends.google.com/trends/explore?date=all_2008&gprop=news&q=loot boxes](https://trends.google.com/trends/explore?date=all_2008&gprop=news&q=loot%20boxes).

⁸⁰ Van Dijk, Teun A. "Multidisciplinary CDA: A Plea for Diversity." In *Methods of Critical Discourse Analysis*, compiled by Ruth Wodak and Michael Meyer, 95-120. Vol. 113. Introducing Qualitative Methods Series. Thousand Oaks, CA: SAGE Publications, 2001. 116.

4.2 Critical Discourse Analysis

I will analyze my corpus using the qualitative textual Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) as described by Van Dijk. The essence of this analysis can be found in the analysis itself, where I have collected the most relevant findings.

The analysis will (1) clarify and describe the current dominant discourse in game media around the relationship between microtransactions and fairness in video games and (2) display how this discourse differs from the discourse in mainstream media.

The *critical discourse analysis* by Van Dijk, is a multidisciplinary approach to discover how a discourse is shaped. His method is mostly linguistic which suits my research because the corpus contains only written text. I will use Van Dijk's theoretical and three-step methodological examination.

The first step is for the researcher to find the global meaning of a text. These so-called semantic macrostructures can be from local microstructures of meaning and can be discovered by listing discourse topics.⁸¹ In my research, this has already been done during the corpus selection where one of my criteria was that the text had to be about loot boxes. An example of a global meaning of a text can be 'Loot boxes add unfair advantages to players.' My analysis will be focused on fairness since this is the global meaning that was most prevalent.

The second step is to find local meanings. These are forms of implicit or indirect meanings that provide information that can only be gathered from the meaning of a text (for example allusions, implications and vagueness can be used to imply certain connotations).⁸² An example of a local meaning from my corpus is "but cosmetic-only microtransactions still shows their greed."⁸³ Wherein 'their' has a negative connotation towards game publishers and is polarizing. Also, local meanings are important because they often provide context; in a sentence

⁸¹ Van Dijk, Teun A. "Multidisciplinary CDA: A Plea for Diversity." In *Methods of Critical Discourse Analysis*, compiled by Ruth Wodak and Michael Meyer, 95-120. Vol. 113. Introducing Qualitative Methods Series. Thousand Oaks, CA: SAGE Publications, 2001. 102.

⁸² Van Dijk, Teun A. "Multidisciplinary CDA: A Plea for Diversity." In *Methods of Critical Discourse Analysis*, compiled by Ruth Wodak and Michael Meyer, 95-120. Vol. 113. Introducing Qualitative Methods Series. Thousand Oaks, CA: SAGE Publications, 2001. 104

⁸³ Blanco8x8, comment on Jonathon Dornbush, "Battlefield 2018 Microtransactions Reportedly Cosmetic-Only Following Battlefield 2 Controversy," *IGN*, March 2, 2018, <https://www.ign.com/articles/2018/03/03/battlefield-2018-microtransactions-reportedly-cosmetic-only-following-star-wars-battlefront-2-controversy>

as ‘loot boxes and such things’, *things* refer to other microtransaction practices which is relevant context when you perform an analysis.

During this step, I also draw from the *Critical Discourse Analysis: the Critical Study of Language* by Fairclough.⁸⁴ Game journalists use mainstream media sources to write about the loot box controversy: they also look from a legal perspective. Fairclough calls this *interdiscursivity* and sees this as a way to reconstruct an existing discourse.⁸⁵ By including interdiscursivity in my CDA, I will be able to reflect on the contribution of the mainstream media to the discourse on loot boxes used by game media.

The third step is to determine pragmatic properties of a communicative occurrence. These properties are subtle formal structures that suggest something about the author’s intention, opinion, concerns, perspective, mood and/or emotion.⁸⁶ An example from my analysis is: ‘All in a game featuring a war where so many people lost their life... it trivializes it so much its almost sickening. (*sic*)’⁸⁷ The use of the word ‘sickening’ at the end of the comment shows the general feeling towards the use of loot boxes this author has and illustrates the point they want to make. When determining pragmatic properties of an article or comment, one has to consider the level of knowledge of the author to make an appropriate analysis. Within game media, knowledge on a specific game-related topic can be acknowledged using the idea of *gaming capital*:

This highly flexible and contextual currency can be gained by being knowledgeable about games, and it can be exchanged with other players. Gaming capital highlights how gaming does not take place in a vacuum but gets its meaning in a larger game cultural frame. [...] The ways of gaining gaming capital are not limited to playing games but the games-related productive activities that are appreciated in the player’s social circle can as well become sources of gaming capital.⁸⁸

⁸⁴ Fairclough, Norman. 2010. *Critical Discourse Analysis: The Critical Study of Language*. London: Routledge. Accessed December 13, 2018. ProQuest Ebook Central.

⁸⁵ Fairclough, Norman. 2010. *Critical Discourse Analysis: The Critical Study of Language*. London: Routledge. Accessed December 13, 2018. ProQuest Ebook Central. 94-96.

⁸⁶ Van Dijk, 106.

⁸⁷ Marusame, comment on Jason Schreier, "After The Loot Box Fury, The People Behind The Next *Battlefield* Are Being Very Cautious," *Kotaku*, March 2, 2018, <https://kotaku.com/after-the-loot-box-fury-the-people-behind-the-next-bat-1823475844>

⁸⁸ Sotamaa, Olli. *Achievement Unlocked: Rethinking Gaming Capital*. Report no. 2. DEPARTMENT OF INFORMATION STUDIES AND INTERACTIVE MEDIA, University of Tampere. 79.

The existence of gaming capital underlines that discourse are social practices since it specifically states that gaming gets its meaning in a larger cultural frame. With gaming capital, we have to keep in mind that the writers of the articles themselves have more gaming capital since they are professional game journalists. Commenters who comment frequently or go into discussion with the authors also have more gaming capital and therefore influence on the discourse than random anonymous users.

To conclude, applying Van Dijk's CDA on my corpus, also drawing from Fairclough's interdiscursivity, the discourse on gambling in games can be explicated.⁸⁹

⁸⁹ An example of the CDA has been added as appendix.

5. Analysis

In this chapter I will analyze what discourse game journalists and gamers use to talk about fairness in video games using the van Dijk's critical discourse analysis and Fairclough's concept of interdiscursivity.

As written before, the mainstream media focus on whether elements in games can be considered gambling, while the game media are interested in fairness. To illustrate this, theKhanWasHere, a commenter on Gamespot, states that:

While there is no question that purchasing an item without knowing exactly what it contains is gambling, I believe what is as malicious or worse than selling digital items is deliberately building your game so the progression is hampered.⁹⁰

Here he states that loot boxes are without question, at least to him, gambling. He also adds that the real discussion is that because of microtransactions, games become less fun to play. I found that many game journalists and gamers share his opinion. They mostly agree that loot boxes are, in fact, a form of gambling. Bat725 simply states: "it's gambling, and the publishers know it."⁹¹ Jason Schreier reacts on his own article on Kotaku:

I've never actually cared enough about cosmetics to spend real money on them, but it's so crazy to me that apparently companies can make more revenue off slot machines than they would if

⁹⁰ theKhanWasHere, comment on Eddie Makuch, "If This New Video Game Loot Box Bill Becomes Law, It Could Shake Up The Industry." GameSpot. February 14, 2018. Accessed June 20, 2018. <https://www.gamespot.com/articles/if-this-new-video-game-loot-box-bill-becomes-law-i/1100-6456767/>.

⁹¹ Bat725, comment on jsprunk, "Star Wars Battlefront 2's Loot Box Controversy Explained," *Gamespot*, November 22, 2017, <https://www.gamespot.com/articles/star-wars-battlefront-2s-loot-box-controversy-expl/1100-6455155/>

they just sold things piecemeal in a store. It really is predatory, appealing to the secret (or not-so-secret) gambling addiction inside us all.⁹²

Criticizing not only the gambling mechanics but also the revenue model based on randomized items instead of being able to buy the item you actually want.

⁹² Jason Schreier, comment on rogueIndy, "After The Loot Box Fury, The People Behind The Next Battlefield Are Being Very Cautious," *Kotaku*, March 2, 2018, <https://kotaku.com/after-the-loot-box-fury-the-people-behind-the-next-bat-1823475844>.

5.1 Skill > labor > chance

As mentioned before, though all categories of play are fair in their own way, they are not always perceived as such. Some players and developers argue that games have become too easy because of the shifting focus on a reachable completion of video games for any player, which has gameplay concentrating more on time investment than skill development.⁹³ Within society there seems to be a popular discourse wherein games of skill are somehow *better* than games of chance (or time investment). This is also visible in the corpus: GameSpot points out that the developers of *SW:BF2* “expressed that [...] player progress would come down to player skill”⁹⁴ and that the game did not follow up on this promise. EA reacted on the accusations with the statement “creating a fair and fun game experience is of critical importance to EA”.⁹⁵ Implying that skill (agon) is fair and favored over chance (alea) and labor and thus being seen as ‘better’.

⁹³ Juul, J. *The Art of Failure: An Essay on the Pain of Playing Video Games*. 2013. Cambridge: MIT Press. Accessed October 27, 2018. ProQuest Ebook Central. 29.

⁹⁴ "Star Wars Battlefront 2's Loot Box Controversy Explained." GameSpot. November 14, 2017. Accessed December 11, 2018. <https://www.gamespot.com/articles/star-wars-battlefront-2s-loot-box-controversy-expl/1100-6455155/>.

⁹⁵ *Ibidem*.

5.2 Pay-to-win

Most people show concern that the implementation of microtransaction in games are forcing the player to spend more money in order to win. This focusses on game progression and shows uneasiness over games of labor-elements. GameSpot writes:

In similar fashion to titles working with a games-as-a-service model, the microtransaction system in place prior to *SW:BF2*'s launch featured multiple packs of varying value to purchase. The purpose of this feature was speed up the player's progress and overcome long-term investment into the game. But in the days since the beta, and even before its launch, general perception to how the game offered these paid options were unfavorable.⁹⁶

A player could do the 'labor' to reach a higher level but could pay for a quick way to reach the same level as well. This does not sit well with game media. To clarify this point, user Lilhurk1985187 comments:

I'm talking about loot crate systems tied directly to game progression. With the game's dependence on loot crates, numerous claimed that the gameplay loop of Battlefront II didn't value player time or investment in the game.⁹⁷

Other commenters made a similar statement, saying that EA crossed a line when the loot box system became part of the game progression. Otterwise on Kotaku writes: "The thing you

⁹⁶ "Star Wars Battlefront 2's Loot Box Controversy Explained." GameSpot. November 14, 2017. Accessed December 11, 2018. <https://www.gamespot.com/articles/star-wars-battlefront-2s-loot-box-controversy-expl/1100-6455155/>.

⁹⁷ Lilhurk1985187, comment on Gamespot Staff, "Star Wars Battlefront 2's Loot Box Controversy Explained." GameSpot. November 14, 2017, <https://www.gamespot.com/articles/star-wars-battlefront-2s-loot-box-controversy-expl/1100-6455155/>.

spent hours and hours to earn isn't special when someone can pay \$10 and get it instantly.''⁹⁸

Gamespot user Geomancer states:

What they're actually doing is trying to find a way to tie progression behind loot boxes. [...] They really want people pushed into a corner to where they feel like buying them is worth 'saving their time'. The problem with all of this is: They're intentionally putting things into the game that are not fun, so boring in fact that there is monetary value in skipping it. That's the hallmark of poor game design.⁹⁹

Geomancer worries about changes in game design when games become a service, thereby criticizing the current state of the games industry. Commenters agree that games becoming pay-to-win is where they draw the line.

⁹⁸ Otterwise, comment on Dementid, "Battlefront II's New Microtransactions Are An Improvement, But Unlocks Are Still Grindy,'" *Kotaku*, April 18, 2018, <https://kotaku.com/battlefront-iis-new-microtransactions-are-an-improvement-1825363356>

⁹⁹ Geomancer, comment on Jason Schreier, "After The Loot Box Fury, The People Behind The Next Battlefield Are Being Very Cautious,'" *Kotaku*, March 2, 2018, <https://kotaku.com/after-the-loot-box-fury-the-people-behind-the-next-bat-1823475844>.

5.3 Completionism

Another point frequently made in the corpus is the issue of getting an ‘incomplete game’.

Commenter knickstr states:

Less than 10 years ago everything in game was unlocked by challenges. Now you have to open loot boxes for the remote chance of getting what you want.¹⁰⁰

There also seems to be conflict concerning cosmetic-only loot boxes. The general consensus is that loot boxes with cosmetic items are acceptable or even a good example of a loot box because it has nothing to do with gameplay, but some argue that those loot boxes are also unfair because they withhold you from gaining access to everything in the game: ‘how about make a solid game and sell it on its own merits. Have unlockables for cosmetics as part of the progression system.’¹⁰¹ This reflects the unfairness Stenros, Sotamaa and Lizardi researched.¹⁰²

103

¹⁰⁰ knickstr, comment on Jonathon Dornbush, "Battlefield 2018 Microtransactions Reportedly Cosmetic-Only Following Battlefield 2 Controversy," *IGN*, March 2, 2018, <https://www.ign.com/articles/2018/03/03/battlefield-2018-microtransactions-reportedly-cosmetic-only-following-star-wars-battlefront-2-controversy>

¹⁰¹ LOLwhateva, comment on Jonathon Dornbush, "https://www.ign.com/articles/2018/03/03/battlefield-2018-microtransactions-reportedly-cosmetic-only-following-star-wars-battlefront-2-controversy," *IGN*, March 2, 2018, <https://www.ign.com/articles/2018/03/03/battlefield-2018-microtransactions-reportedly-cosmetic-only-following-star-wars-battlefront-2-controversy>

¹⁰² Sotamaa, Olli, and Jaakko Stenros. *Understanding the Range of Player Services*. Report no. 2. DEPARTMENT OF INFORMATION STUDIES AND INTERACTIVE MEDIA, University of Tampere. 12.

¹⁰³ Lizardi, Ryan. "DLC: Perpetual Commodification of the Video Game." *Democratic Communiqué* 25, no. 1 (2012): 33-45. Accessed December 11, 2018. <http://journals.fcla.edu/demcom/article/view/78739/76133>. 37.

5.4 Implementation of the microtransaction system as revenue model

The debate about the loot boxes in *SW:BF2* spurred a bigger debate about loot boxes and microtransaction in all games. Jason Schreier, journalist at Kotaku, writes: “based on conversations I’ve had with developers at a range of major studios lately, nobody wants their game to be remembered for its loot boxes.”¹⁰⁴ This is an interesting development, as the game media forced the publishers to rethink the way they implement and present their microtransaction systems in the current revenue model. Other comments also showed fear that the current revenue model might impact game design in a negative way.

Besides the dissatisfaction with the revenue model game media express, there also seems to be a fear of restrictions from outside of the games industry caused by the debate that could impact games. Schreier writes:

Any sort of legislation that treats loot boxes like gambling might be bad news for everyone, because, among other reasons, legislators don’t often know much about the nuances of video games.¹⁰⁵

Game media point out that the debate is not so much about gambling as it is about the implementation of microtransactions, thereby using interdiscursivity by also addressing the standpoint mainstream media. Game media are aware of the different direction the debate has taken in mainstream media. JSprunk, another Gamespot commenter states: “complete misrepresentation done by a grandstanding lawyer turned politician who’s doing nothing more

¹⁰⁴ Schreier, Jason. "After The Loot Box Fury, The People Behind The Next Battlefield Are Being Very Cautious." Kotaku. March 02, 2018. Accessed December 11, 2018. <https://kotaku.com/after-the-loot-box-fury-the-people-behind-the-next-bat-1823475844>.

¹⁰⁵ *Ibidem*.

than using people for votes.’’¹⁰⁶ By which he means that the debate around gambling in games is used by stakeholders of the mainstream media to fuel their own goals.

Commenter RicanV on Gamespot writes about the debate: ‘‘there are problems to be solved but we’re looking for the solution in the wrong places. We have to address the problem ourselves.’’¹⁰⁷ By this he means that the problem gamers and gamer journalists have with the microtransaction system will not disappear if loot boxes are being banned from video games and the games industry has to think of a fitting solution that will put an end to the gambling debate in mainstream media but also to the debate about unfair gameplay in game media. User XenomorphAlien on Gamespot¹⁰⁸ reacts: ‘The absence of numbers speaks for itself. The game tanked compared to the first which is great news. Well done fellow gamers.’ Implying that the outrage over the loot box system in SW:BF2 will force publishers to change their approach to microtransactions. The comment is liked significantly more than other comments, and the user has posted over 4760 comments in total on this website which adds to his gaming capital, confirmed by other commenters rallying behind him and replying on the initial comment.

¹⁰⁶ JSprunk, comment on Gamespot Staff, "Star Wars Battlefront 2's Loot Box Controversy Explained," *Gamespot*, November 22, 2017, <https://www.gamespot.com/articles/star-wars-battlefront-2s-loot-box-controversy-expl/1100-6455155/>

¹⁰⁷ RicanV, comment on Eddie Makuch, "If This New Video Game Loot Box Bill Becomes Law, It Could Shake Up The Industry," *Gamespot*, February 14, 2018, <https://www.gamespot.com/articles/if-this-new-video-game-loot-box-bill-becomes-law-i/1100-6456767/>.

¹⁰⁸ XenomorphAlien, comment on Gamespot Staff, "Star Wars: Battlefront 2 Underperforms, Microtransactions Coming Back," *Gamespot*, January 30, 2018, <https://www.gamespot.com/articles/star-wars-battlefront-2-underperforms-microtransac/1100-6456447/>

6. Conclusion

There are two different loot box debates at the same time. The game media are aware of this and do use interdiscursivity to address both issues. The mainstream media are not as well-informed: since the interdiscursivity is one-sided, a consequence is that there might be no room for self-regulation by the games industry. Legislators might think that the games industry is still debating the gambling subject, even though game media are addressing another problem. This could result in restrictions to make sure publishers do not add gamblified microtransactions into their games instead of giving the games industry a chance to self-regulate and find a suitable solution for the implementation of loot boxes.

The discourse on loot boxes in *SW:BF2* used by game media debates whether or not they are *fair*. So, having loot boxes that enhance your abilities or provide you with better gear are unfair because you do not need any skills to get them. Even though luck and labor are fair in their own way, skill is what is most fair in the current discourse. Some players think that certain gamblified elements are acceptable, such as loot boxes that only contain cosmetic items, but others think all gamblified microtransactions are unfair. The gambling aspect of loot boxes is seen as negative because it can give unfair advantages and because it is unfair that you have to pay extra to get access to everything the game has to offer. For game media, the boundary between gambling and gaming lies at the point where skill becomes less important than luck or labor. Publishers are going to have to re-think the way they implement microtransactions in games from a legal perspective and a game design perspective, meaning that the current business model for games might change.

This research was biased because of the use of the *eBizMBA* list as foundation for my corpus, where they only rank English websites; results mainly apply to the USA and Europe and no global generalization can be made. Also, CDA is done from the perspective of the researcher and other researches might have interpreted text in a different way. The results also are only a representation of the game media's discourse since it only says something about discourse in these specific articles. This research focused on video games with loot boxes but to fully understand the discourses in the loot box controversy further research with other case studies and a broader corpus is recommended.

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Extract Critical Discourse Analysis – Articles

Sentence	Context	Macro structures	Local meanings	Pragmatic properties	Gaming capital
Despite this, DICE developers expressed that these options were not pay to win, and that player progress would come down to player skill.	Part of a paragraph about how <i>SW:BF2</i> had microtransactions to speed up player's progress as part of the games as service model.	Loot boxes in <i>SW:BF2</i> are closer tied with player progress then skill is despite earlier made promises.	The author feels the need to mention that progress would be tied to skill, suggesting that that is how it should work.	'Despite' suggests in the context that people were already sceptical about the loot box system in <i>SW:BF2</i> .	While the author is unknown, GameSpot is one of the most popular game media websites. Many links are added to the article, adding to credibility.
"Creating a fair and fun game experience is of critical importance to EA. The crate mechanics of Star Wars Battlefront II are not gambling. A player's ability to succeed in the game is not dependent on purchasing crates. Players can also earn crates through playing the game and not spending any money at all. Once obtained, players are always guaranteed to	This is part of an article that explains the loot box controversy. This is a reaction by <i>SW:BF2</i> publisher EA.	The game is fun and fair because buying loot boxes is optional and loot boxes are not gambling because there is always a reward.	The quote suggests that a game is fun and fair when player skill is important. Actively mentioning a player's ability to succeed seems to suggest that succeeding is part of a fun and fair game experience. The quote suggests that you can not call something gambling if you can also do it without using a real currency.	'Critical importance' is an exaggeration to emphasize that gameplay is the main focus of the publisher, not earning more money.	-

receive content that can be used in game."					
That'll be a theme: Based on conversations I've had with developers at a range of major studios lately, nobody wants their game to be remembered for its loot boxes.	Part of an article on how the games industry might undergo changes because of the loot box controversy.	Developers and publishers have to rethink how they are going to implement loot boxes from now on.	<p>The author predicts that loot boxes will still be part of games.</p> <p>The author suggest that developers will be more careful with how they use loot boxes in their games.</p> <p>'Remembered for its loot boxes' implies that that is exactly what happened to <i>SW:BF2</i>.</p>	-	Jason Schreier is a well-known game media journalist for Kotaku.
Any sort of legislation that treats loot boxes like gambling might be bad news for everyone, because, among other reasons, legislators don't often know much about the nuances of video games.	Part of an article on how the games industry might undergo changes because of the loot box controversy.	Self-regulation would be best for the games industry.	<p>The author implies that loot boxes should not be treated as gambling by law.</p> <p>'Nuances of video games' is vague, and the author assumes that readers know more about the topic.</p>	-	Jason Schreier is a well-known game media journalist for Kotaku.

Extract Critical Discourse Analysis - Comments

Comment	Local context	Macro-structure(s)	Local meaning(s)	Pragmatic properties	Gaming capital
A step in the right direction, but cosmetic-only microtransactions still shows their greed.	This is a comment on an article about how EA is going to add loot boxes to <i>SW:BF2</i> again but that these loot boxes will be cosmetic-only and no longer will effect game progress.	Cosmetic-only loot boxes are an improvement, but loot boxes are still a problem.	'A step in the right direction' implies that a game without loot boxes/microtransactions is the goal that should be reached. The use of 'their' polarizes the game publishers against the players.	The use of 'greed' instead of a more neutral word such as revenue model shows that the the commenter regards this practice as negative because of the negative connotations connected with the word 'greed'.	The commenter has been a member of this website for 5 years which gives them some credibility. However, they do not further engage in the comment section underneath this article.
yeah, Call of duty WWII from what i seen has lootboxes able to be seen by other players to try and get kids and those with a weak hold on their wallets to see how much fun other people are having and spend money on it too. All in a game featuring a war where so many people lost their life... it	This comment is an addition to an earlier comment made by this user about what a 'fair' progression system should look like.	Loot boxes are disrespectful, predatory and ruin a game's progression system.	'To try and get kids and those with a weak hold' suggests that loot boxes prey on certain groups.	The use of the word 'sickening' shows the general feeling towards the use of loot boxes this commenter has.	The commenter is creator of a Steam group with over 4000 members that fights censorship in games. The commenter also frequently reacts on articles and engages in discussion with the author and other commenters.

<p>trivializes it so much its almost sickening.</p>					
<p>While there is no question that purchasing an item without knowing exactly what it contains is gambling. I believe what is as malicious or worse than selling digital items is deliberately building your game so the progression is hampered. Assassins Creed Origins has to be the worst culprit of designing a game that works against the player, forcing you to buy your way out of endlessly spinning your wheels with pointless grinding of side quests. Come on, after nearly 10 hours you still need to be at least twice your level to naturally progress</p>	<p>The comment is a reaction on an article about the possibility that loot boxes might get prohibited by law. The commenter offers his own standpoint about loot boxes.</p>	<p>Microtransactions that hinder your game progress on purpose are worse than gamblified loot boxes.</p>	<p>'There is no question' suggests that it is a non-discussable fact that loot boxes are gambling.</p> <p>'Forcing you to buy' implies that players have no self-agency when it comes to paying extra for microtransactions that speed up progression.</p> <p>'Work against the player' suggests that publishers are more interested in making profit than in making a good game.</p> <p>'endlessly spinning your wheels with pointless grinding' implies that grinding (games of labor) is not really part of the game and skill is the only important aspect of gameplay.</p>	<p>'Malicious' is strong wording and implies that the practice of doing so is evil.</p> <p>'Come on' is suggestive and shows that the commenter does not understand why someone would argue otherwise.</p>	<p>2 other commenters replied in agreement with this comment. Though the commenter only joined half a year before this analysis was performed, they already commented over 1500 times which shows engagement in game media.</p>

through the story campaign unless you buy your way through to "save time".... That's worse than loot boxes					
@jsprunk: I disagree. Loot boxes are like slot machines, in a sense. You put in your money, and pull the lever. Hopefully, there's a positive outcome, otherwise, you put in more money and try again. Same as scratch lottery cards. Many people become addicted to this process, because of the rush of excitement that occurs when you finally win. It's gambling, and the publishers know it.	The comment is part of a comment thread about loot boxes not being gambling and misinterpretation of them by government agencies and mainstream media.	Loot boxes are gambling.	'Otherwise, you put in more money and try again.' Implies that when a loot box does not have the desired results the player will buy another loot box.	'It's gambling, and the publishers know it' is a strong statement at the end of the comment that discourages others from going against it. It can almost be seen as a hyperbole used for emphasis or effect.	The commenter has been a member of the site for 14 years. They reply several times a month on articles. They engage in discussion underneath articles.
I've never actually cared enough about cosmetics to spend real money on them, but it's so crazy to	This is a reaction on a comment that argues all kind of loot boxes	Loot boxes trigger gambling addiction.	'Secret (or not so secret) gambling addiction inside us all' suggests that everyone is susceptible to	'I've never actually cared enough' implies that cosmetic-only loot boxes are actually not even worth a thought.	Jason Schreier is a well-known game media journalist and writer with a big following. He always participates in

<p>me that apparently companies can make more revenue off slot machines than they would if they just sold things piecemeal in a store. It really is predatory, appealing to the secret (or not-so-secret) gambling addiction inside us all.</p>	<p>should be removed from games not just non-cosmetic-only ones.</p>		<p>gambling addiction and that most of us are well aware of that.</p>	<p>By 'slot machines' the author actually means loot boxes. Using a metonymy suggest that loot boxes and slot machines are the same thing. This is a rhetoric device.</p>	<p>discussions under his article. He has a huge gaming capital.</p>
<p>I'm talking about loot crate systems tied directly to game progression. With the game's dependence on loot crates, numerous claimed that the gameplay loop of Battlefield II didn't value player time or investment in the game.</p>	<p>Comment to clarify an earlier statement addressing different kind of loot boxes.</p>	<p>Gameplay and game progression should not be directly linked with buying loot boxes.</p>	<p>'Dependence on loot crates' implies that you cannot play the game without loot boxes.</p> <p>'Didn't value player time' means that the game does not reward equally for labor as it does for chance.</p> <p>'Investment in the game' suggests that players who do buy loot boxes are less invested than players who grind.</p>	<p>'Numerous claimed' indicates that it must be true because many people said it was.</p>	<p>The commenter replies frequently on articles and is active on several gaming websites.</p>
<p>I think that's a big part of it. The thing you spent</p>	<p>This comment is a reply on a</p>	<p>Extra content should not be</p>	<p>'At least it's just skins' suggests that instantly</p>	<p>'Hours and hours' is a rhetoric device</p>	<p>The commenter joins discussions</p>

<p>hours and hours to earn isn't special when someone can pay \$10 and get it instantly. At least in this instant it's just skins.</p>	<p>statement that players should enjoy spending many hours (games of labor) to unlock every item instead of getting it immediately.</p>	<p>instantly buyable.</p>	<p>buying skins is not as bad as pay-to-win.</p>	<p>(repetition) to emphasize a point one wants to make. The commenter suggests that no one wants to spend a really long time on something you can simply buy to get.</p>	<p>underneath articles on a daily base.</p>
<p>What they're actually doing is trying to find a way to tie progression behind lootboxes. Oh, you'll of course be able to avoid them, and it will be "player choice" but just like in Battlefield II when people run the numbers they'll see just how long it takes to actually play the game with <i>only</i> spending \$60. They're desperately trying to figure out just how far they can push that line. They really want people</p>	<p>Comment on an article about how the implementation of microtransactions should be changed in the future.</p>	<p>The current microtransaction revenue model ensures poor game design.</p>	<p>Using 'they' is polarizing: it puts publishers against players.</p> <p>Using quotation marks around 'player choice' suggest that it's a sarcastic remark and that there is no player choice. The same goes for 'saving their time', the commenter suggests that gaming should have nothing to do with saving time.</p>	<p>Putting <i>only</i> in italics stresses the word and implies that the commenter thinks that \$60 dollars is actually already a lot.</p> <p>Using 'desperately' suggests that publishers are willing to do everything to make more money.</p> <p>By using the idiom 'pushed in a corner' the commenter suggests that publishers are preying on players.</p>	<p>The commenter engages only in discussion underneath articles with certain topics, but when they do they make several arguments and reply on other commenters.</p>

<p>pushed into a corner to where they feel like buying them is worth 'saving their time'. The problem with all of this is: They're intentionally putting things into their game that are not fun, so boring in fact that there is monetary value in skipping it. That's the hallmark of poor game design. The ultimate goal behind every decision should be "is this fun?" but all their decisions are instead based on "will this drive sales?".</p>					
<p>It's sad to see a whole generation of gamers now that have no idea that only less than 10 years ago everything in game was unlocked by challenges. Now you have to open loot boxes for the remote</p>	<p>This is a comment on an article about how EA is going to add loot boxes to <i>SW:BF2</i> again but that these loot boxes will be cosmetic-only and no longer</p>	<p>Extra content should be unlocked by earning the reward, not by buying loot boxes.</p>	<p>'A whole generation of gamers' implies that there are several groups of gamers and that the younger generation only knows the microtransaction system and now how it is to be rewarded for</p>	<p>The use of 'sad' shows that the commenter thinks that the old model was better than the new one.</p>	<p>The commenter has an average number of likes on his comments. They only recently became a member of the website.</p>

chance of getting what you want.	will effect game progress.		skill and investment. 'Remote chance' implies that you probably will not get what you want from a loot box.		
Yea who gives a shit. EA continues to see how much they can get away with by poking and prodding their consumers. Just cosmetic... How about make a solid game and sell it on its own merits. Have unlockables for cosmetics as part of the progression system. Battlefield can sell on its own rights it doesnt need lootboxes to fuel this money hungry corporation.	This is a comment on an article about how EA is going to add loot boxes to <i>SW:BF2</i> again but that these loot boxes will be cosmetic-only and no longer will effect game progress.	Extra content should be unlocked by earning the reward, loot boxes are capitalist.	'They' polarizes; EA is the bad guy. 'make a solid game' suggests that the games published by EA are not valid. 'Battlefield can sell on its own rights' implies that the game should be made in such a way that it will earn enough money from the initial ales alone.	'Poking and prodding' suggest that the publisher is using players as test objects and that they are annoying them. 'Fuel this money hungry corporation'; money hungry suggests that they do not actually need to earn more. Corporation has negative connotations within game media (as in 'big bad bully').	The commenter reacts several times on this article, often arguing with other commenters.
The whole argument that loot boxes equate to casino gambling is bogus. There is no win/lose condition related to loot boxes and no one online gaming can	Comment on an article that explains the loot box controversy.	Loot boxes are not gambling, and the government is using the debate for their own agenda.	The commenter seems to argue that the general consensus is that loot boxes are the same as casino gambling.	'Complete' in 'complete misrepresentation' is an exaggeration. Commenter implies that the debate is not just a little bit misunderstood by the politician but	Other commenters disagree underneath this commenters comment. The commenter does not engage in further interaction.

<p>be enjoyed 100% without any microtransactions or loot boxes. Complete misrepresentation done by a grandstanding lawyer turned politician who's doing nothing more than using people for votes. I hate microtransactions and loot boxes, therefore I don't buy them, but I don't fault anyone who likes them. The only way you might equate loot boxes to gambling is if you first define playing video games as a form of gambling. This is the government's backdoor approach to getting a bigger piece of the multibillion dollar video game industry pie. They come off acting like they're helping</p>			<p>The commenter also implies that the debate is used by governmental to reach their own unrelated goals.</p> <p>Commenter suggests that loot boxes can only be defined as gambling as playing video games is defined as gambling as well.</p> <p>'This' in 'this is the government's backdoor approach' is vague and a reader has to fill in for themselves what exactly the commenter means by 'this'.</p> <p>'All they're doing is helping themselves' suggests a negative feeling towards the government.</p>	<p>that they missed the point all together.</p>	<p>Commenter reacts on game media posts several times a day.</p>
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<p>people, when in reality all they're doing is helping themselves.</p>					
<p>There are problems to be solved but we're looking for the solution in the wrong places. We have to address the problem ourselves not put band-aid after band-aid with no resolution. The liquor store isn't selling your kids the six pack in the same manner a video game store isn't selling a minor an M rated game. Those games are purchased by a third party and then distributed to the minor. Consider all the liquor regulations in place now and it still does nothing from someone purchasing beers for a minor. All the bills above do is introduce another avenue for</p>	<p>Reply in a discussion /comment thread about games being regulated because minors play them.</p>	<p>Regulating loot boxes in games should be done regardless whether or not minors are involved if we do not want the government to get involved.</p>	<p>'The wrong places' is vague, commenter implies that leaning on the government is a 'wrong place'.</p> <p>The commenter makes the argument that regulations for minors do not guarantee the desired results.</p> <p>'As a community' suggests that players are united and have agency.</p> <p>The comment ends with a rhetorical question, which suggests that the opposite should be done.</p>	<p>'Band-aid after band-aid' is the repetitive use of a metaphor to imply that current solutions are insignificant.</p>	<p>The commenter is very active in the community and has many followers. They react several times a week and have written over 2500 comments so far. They also actively engage in discussions underneath articles and not just vent their own opinion.</p>

<p>governments to regulate video games. As a community are we legitimately saying, "We can't regulate our household spending so we welcome the government to do this for us." ?</p>					
<p>The absence of numbers speaks for itself. The game tanked compared to the first which is great news. Well done fellow gamers.</p>	<p>Reaction under an article about how <i>SW:BF2</i> underperforms and will re-introduce cosmetic-only loot boxes.</p>	<p>Backlash from the game community on the current revenue system yields results.</p>	<p>The comment is very general and requires background knowledge from other commenters. 'Fellow gamers' unites the commenters as a uniform group.</p>	<p>'Great news' implies that financial failure of the game is positive.</p>	<p>The commenter is very active and comments daily. Comments get a significant amount of likes from other commenters. The comments also get several replies both agreeing and disagreeing. Commenter engages in discussion.</p>

Verklaring Intellectueel Eigendom

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