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game**

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In the summer of 2008, the seventh generation of video game consoles was in full swing. During that year's E3 Media and Business Summit, the game industry's annual game trade show and a major marketing event, a gleeful Don Mattrick took the stage to outline the Xbox 360 strategy for the years to come. "[Welcome] to Xbox 360", Microsoft's Senior Vice President opened the press conference, "home of the biggest blockbusters and home to fun and entertainment for everyone. [...] Big franchises are a mainstay of our industry. And the biggest sellers are on Xbox 360" (Nicholas 2008).

Mattrick's opening statement neatly summarizes the core tenets of the publishing strategy pursued by Microsoft. Above all, his statement singles out the importance of the blockbuster, a term generally associated with post-classical Hollywood movies (cf. Cucco 2009, Stringer 2003). Drawing on the concept of the blockbuster makes sense because the game industry's console segment compares well with the hit-driven nature of large parts of the movie industry. Both rely heavily on high-risk, high-return productions that have "high production and marketing costs" (Egenfeldt Nielsen et al. 2008, p.17; cf. Rifkin 2000, p.199). In addition, both share a mode of production and circulation that can be characterized as rationalized and technology-driven (Tschang 2005, Tschang & Szczypula 2006).

Apart from highlighting the scope and scale of blockbuster productions, Mattrick emphasizes the importance of "big franchises." Five action-themed titles in particular were singled out during the trade show: *Halo 3* (Bungie Studios 2007), *Call of Duty 4: Modern Warfare* (Infinity Ward and Treyarch 2007), *Bioshock* (Irrational Games and Digital Extremes 2007), and *Assassin's Creed* (Ubisoft Montreal 2007), all released during the 2007 holiday season, along with *Grand Theft Auto IV* (Rockstar North), released April 2008. These titles illustrate well how the franchising strategy—that is, the serialization of discrete game titles, or what Denson and Jahn-Sudmann (2013) label "inter-ludic seriality"—dominates video game publishing. Three of these titles are the third and fourth installments in a series, whereas *Bioshock* and *Assassin's Creed* are positioned as "franchise starters," launched early in the console cycle to establish new series.

While blockbuster economics and the logic of serialization are not exclusive to the game industry, what does differentiate video game publishing from other sectors in the cultural industries is the cyclical introduction of standardized hardware platforms, typically every five to seven years (Schilling 2003). From the introduction of the Magnavox Odyssey (1972) onwards, the console market segment has been economically driven and technologically structured by a series of hardware cycles. Apart from changes in game technology, every consecutive console cycle is a moment of disruption and marks a shift in gamer discourse, institutional practices, as

well as the form and format of the blockbuster video game (cf. Bissell 2010, Chatfield 2011, pp.27-38, Dymek 2010).

The most recent cycle would be the eighth generation of hardware initiated by the Wii U (2012) and complemented by the Xbox One (2013) and Playstation 4 (2013). Of particular interest to the argument in this paper is the era of the Xbox 360 (2005) and the Playstation 3 (2006). Together with the Wii these machines started the seventh console cycle, sometimes referred to as the high-definition (HD) cycle.¹ Compared to previous cycles, what defines the seventh generation is the networked nature of the hardware, combined with a leap in storage and computational capabilities, allowing for higher resolution images and thus more (photo)realistic video.

The advent of the seventh cycle should be seen against the background of a number of transformations in the wider cultural industries (cf. Jenkins 2006, Lessig 2008, Rifkin 2000). Similar to other sectors, the game industry is in a transitional phase moving from a physical, or packaged goods industry (i.e. selling boxes in retail stores) towards an on-demand circulation model based on digital distribution (Broekhuizen et al. 2013). Whereas big franchises are indeed “the mainstay” of the console segment, as Mattrick put it, what he did not explicitly allude to in his introduction is the fact that the seventh generation is specifically positioned to generate additional revenue beyond traditional retail sales. What has become a novel publishing strategy for blockbuster or “Triple-A” franchises is the digital distribution of game extensions that expand on the original stand-alone game via paid-for content in order to keep gamers engaged and to have the “disc remain fresh.” In this sense, the seventh generation blockbuster game is a hybrid product, signaling the mixture of physical and digital circulation mechanisms.

To be sure, adding post-launch content to a physically distributed game predates the seventh generation. A decade ago game publishers released so-called expansion packs—a format best understood as a self-contained retail addition to a stand-alone game—for PC-based franchises such as *The Sims* (2000) or *Battlefield* (2002). Yet, I would contend that what sets the post-launch publishing strategy for the Xbox 360 and Playstation 3 apart from previous generations is the ubiquity and institutional integration of paid-for downloadable content (PDLC or DLC) for virtually all titles.

The goal of this paper, then, is to critically engage with the seventh generation blockbuster console game, specifically by drawing on political economic theory. Blockbuster games are a significant part of contemporary game culture and popular objects played by tens of millions of gamers, but also rarely theorized artifacts. It must be noted that instead of blockbuster games, gamers, critics, as well as industry professionals more often speak of “Triple-A” games. The select number of transnational console game publishers, such as Ubisoft, Electronic Arts, and Activision Blizzard, that publish Triple-A games, typically categorize them as “packaged goods”—stand-alone, disc-based titles sold primarily via retail outlets.

Rather than discussing seriality vis-à-vis a Triple-A games’ “aesthetic-formal” qualities (Denson and Jahn-Sudmann 2013), the Triple-A game will be theorized here as a cultural commodity. I will argue that understanding contemporary console games inherently means investigating game technology as well as realizing that the Triple-A game is always also a cultural product and cannot therefore be fully understood without acknowledging and unpacking its commodity form.² In other

words, retracing the process of commodification—the process by which a cultural product's use value is transformed into exchange value (cf. Mosco 2009, p.132)—gives us an approach suited to studying *what kind* of Triple-A games are made, *under what conditions*, and *how* they are circulated. The core of my argument is that the Triple-A game is neither simply a discrete cultural commodity, nor just a mere object of play, but is best understood as an incremental and seemingly infinite stream of renewable gaming experiences. Furthermore, the Triple-A game in its commodity form functions fully inside a capitalist framework, and it is hence tied into a specific production and circulation logic.

A techno-economic logic

A console game's platform-dependent nature invites questions concerning the interaction between the technological properties of proprietary game hardware and the publishing strategies of industrial actors. In order to gain a deeper understanding of the political economy of franchising, I will first discuss how the Triple-A console game is afforded and constrained by game hardware. Does the networked mode of circulation alter our understanding of the Triple-A commodity form? In the second part of this paper I argue that the transformation of culture into commodities leads to a particular codification of culture, and as a result the Triple-A game adheres to a particular logic of cultural production, circulation, and consumption. Drawing on Bill Ryan's work on the sociology of capitalist cultural production, attention is drawn to the argument that the Triple-A commodity form acts as a “system of control,” steering game publishers and developers “towards repetition of the particular cultural forms in which companies have invested” (1991, p.178). The third and last part will then offer a case study of the seventh generation installments of the *Call of Duty* franchise to illustrate how publisher Activision Blizzard aims to rationalize game production and circulation. The *Call of Duty* series shows that the Triple-A game has transformed from a stand alone, singular artifact into a perpetually extended, more open-ended commodity type that corresponds with a particular “system of control,” combining the franchising publishing strategy with digitally distributed game extensions.

The console game's platform-dependent nature enforces what one might call a platform-specific modality of production and circulation. Montfort & Bogost (2009, pp.145-150) point out that a game console ties together the computational side of a platform (hardware), interfaces (game controllers and graphical user interfaces), and code (software). Taken together, these elements influence, facilitate, and constrain “particular forms of computational expression” (ibid., p.3). For example, the Xbox 360 uses the DVD format that limits the maximum game size to 7.8 Gigabytes, while the built-in Blu-ray drive of the Playstation 3 is able to read 50 Gigabyte discs. Added to that are a set of more arbitrary but equally restrictive instances of standardization codified in a set of rules and regulations outlined by platform holders such as Microsoft, who enforce intricate TRCs (Technical Requirements Checklists) that apply to all Triple-A games published on a platform.

Technological standardization aids, eases, and from a game publisher's perspective necessitates the reuse of game technology. Structured and constrained by the possibilities of hardware platforms, the game engine operates on top of game hardware and acts as a standardized software platform. The game engine consists of

several components such as the renderer that visualizes the game space, a physics engine, networking code, artificial intelligence code, a sound system, and other parts. A game's commodity form, as Bogost (2006, p.66) explains, shares the material, functional, and intellectual proprietary attributes of the core engine: "These confines both facilitate and limit discursive production, just as the rules of natural languages bound poetry and the rules of optics bound photography." Similarly, Dovey and Kennedy (2006, p.57) see the game engine as "a technologically determining agent in the character of computer games; game engines are not infinitely adaptable or 'content neutral.'" The game engine offers developers a proprietary development platform, which, together with a platform's techno-legal framework, further limits the game developer's design capabilities.

Triple-A games are not only tethered to heavily regulated, uniform proprietary platforms, they are also always software-based artifacts and therefore modular in design. As Manovich (2001, p.30) explains, a game as a new media object consists of "collections of discrete samples (pixels, polygons, voxels, characters, scripts)" (cf. Denson and Jahn-Sudmann 2013, p.3). As a result, additional game content such as maps, clothing for an avatar or entire episodes can quite literally be plugged into, or built on top off a game engine. Unlike the novel or a movie, a Triple-A game's core mechanics can be significantly altered as well as extended via a digitally distributed software upgrade, patch, or content pack. That is to say, a Triple-A console game is ultimately shaped by both a computational platform, a game engine, and a governance structure operated by a platform holder; taken together, these factors structure the technical and economic properties of the Triple-A commodity form and thus have profound implications for the blockbuster game's political economy.

Formatting cultural commodities

The Triple-A game's hit-driven nature is a direct result of the increasingly capital-intensive mode of console game production and circulation. Historically, consecutive console cycles offered more complex technology and demanded bigger development budgets—another strong resemblance to the rise of the blockbuster movie. Because of their costs, overproduction of console games is not an option for game publishers, thereby necessitating a blockbuster publishing strategy, much like that of movie productions in Hollywood's post-classical era (Wasko 2003). Film scholar Michael Allen (2003, p.103) notes that movie related technological innovations, such as sound (1920s), widescreen (1950s), and digital post-production techniques (1980s) resulted in a "progressive shift toward the production of fewer, and more expensive, films using increasingly complex, and equally expensive, new technological systems." This, which Allen (2003, p.108) associates with a "blockbuster mentality," means that such movies "have to have an immediate and massive impact on the marketplace, earning hundreds of millions of dollars in a few weeks." Here we see a striking parity with the Triple-A game.

Without exception, senior executives of Triple-A game publishers emphasize the importance of developing and distributing successful blockbusters as the sole path toward profitability. For instance, during his tenure as Electronic Arts' CEO, John Riccitiello explicitly singled out "driving hits" as one of the game publisher's key strategies. Riccitiello summarizes the publisher's approach to Triple-A publishing as

“fewer, bigger, better,” meaning that a smaller slate of franchises become bigger propositions, requiring higher investments, and, potentially, better financial results (Seeking Alpha 2010).³

Particularly helpful in terms of theorizing the capital-intensive mode of blockbuster production is the work of the Australian sociologist Bill Ryan (1991), who argues that the process of commodification leads to the standardization and codification of cultural production and the rationalization of circulation. To counter or exempt the risks associated with cultural production, Ryan notes that managers of creative labor typically oscillate between the need for creativity, freshness, and originality versus the need for predictability, continuity, and control. As political economist Prindle (1993, p.5) contends in his study of Hollywood movie production, film studios are constantly trying to “replicate the unreplicable,” a challenge that is quite similar to console game development. While consumers exhibit highly unstable taste patterns, at the same time they value “familiar plots, characters, and morals over more artistically innovative fare” (ibid., p.25). Ryan comes to a similar conclusion and adds that cultural commodities—and this goes particularly for hits—have a truncated product life cycle, therefore necessitating “recurrent production” to guarantee the constant flow of sales (1991, p.58). The goal of game publishers and film studios trying to replicate the unreplicable, or rather build on previous successes and hits, guides and structures publishing decisions, which explains the reliance on the franchising strategy.

Ryan builds on Adorno's “culture industry” thesis and conceptualizes “formatting” as a pervasive system of creative control:

By transforming the production of originality into a process governed by company-advocated rules, formatting serves to rationalise the otherwise arbitrary and idiosyncratic play of imaginative creativity and routinely steers artists towards repetition of the particular cultural forms in which companies have invested. (p.178)

The notion of formatting helps us to understand why the Triple-A commodity form can be considered not only as highly standardized, but also formulaic: “Cultural goods produced under the formatting system reveal a marked tendency towards typicality and repetition” (p.184). This is not to say that game design is, or has become an uncreative, mindless practice. Congruent with the contradictions underlying the cultural commodity, the operational side of cultural production is relatively open, and creative managers (i.e. studio heads, producers, publisher executives) who head a project team do not continuously stand looking over the shoulders of individual developers telling them how to work their magic. Thus, the formatting strategy does not so much function on the operational level as it does on the strategic level, by setting limits as to what to develop, when, and by setting “specifications for the project team even before a single original is created” (p.171).

The Triple-A commodity form, in its seventh-gen incarnation, breaks down into two clearly discernible, complementary formatting strategies. First there is franchising; an “inter-ludic” instance of seriality (cf. Denson and Jahn-Sudmann 2013). From the earliest stages of creative conception, a Triple-A game is positioned to be part of a specific temporal publishing framework that is initiated when the first title in a (potential) franchise meets its revenue targets, and is subsequently concluded when

consumer demand and profitability drops. The franchising strategy is complemented by a second formatting strategy, that of digitally distributed content, which leverages the unique textual and technological properties of video games as software. As we will see in the analysis of the *Call of Duty* franchise, the two strategies should not be seen as a fixed set of rules, but instead constitute a dominant format that is composed of a fluid rather than strict set of production and circulation principles.

Call of Duty: A billion dollar franchise

Rather than focusing on individual blockbuster titles, as is common in game studies, I would contend that the Triple-A game should not be considered as a single unit of analysis, since it is always projected to be part of a game franchise. The *Call of Duty* franchise serves as a paradigm case to investigate the serialized anatomy of the Triple-A commodity form. More so than any other contemporary game franchise, the annual instalments of the *Call of Duty* series not only formalized and institutionalized the franchising strategy, it also upped the ante in terms of offering post-launch content by experimenting with the pricing, availability, and release-timing of so called "map packs."

Business strategists, investors, analysts, and industry executives embrace the formatting strategy of franchising as a crucial "monetization option." The key to financial success in the seventh-gen era, in the words of Activision's 2005 annual report, is to increase operating income "derived from an annualized game portfolio" (Activision 2005, p.18).⁴ Arguably more so than any other executive in the console segment, Activision Blizzard CEO Robert Kotick has been particularly blunt about his company's serialization strategy that focuses on "proven franchises." This means "that [titles that] don't have the potential to be exploited every year across every platform," and which do not have "clear sequel potential that can meet [Activision's] objectives of, over time, becoming \$100 million plus franchises," will be purged from the publisher's catalogue (Activision Blizzard 2009). Examples of individual installments that were previously planned for publication by Activision, such as *Gun* (Neversoft et al. 2005), *Brütal Legend* (Double Fine 2009), and *Ghost Busters: The Video Game* (Terminal Reality and Threewave Software 2009), were either shelved or their intellectual properties were sold to other publishers. Many other games published by Activision did not appear to have "sequel potential," such as the action game *Singularity* (Raven Software 2010) and the racing game *Blur* (Bizarre Creations 2010). Both games fell short of (revenue) expectations, leading to the closure of *Blur's* development studio, while *Singularity's* developers were mandated to work on the *Call of Duty* franchise.

The *Call of Duty*-series awaited a different fate and was from the outset positioned to become a franchise, as noted in Activision's annual report: "We will also continue to develop new intellectual properties, such as the upcoming titles *True Crime: Streets of L.A.* and *Call of Duty*, which we hope to establish as franchise properties" (2003, p.10). This "original intellectual property" became, after acquisition of development studio Infinity Ward in 2003, a "wholly owned IP" by Activision and soon turned out to demonstrate the sequel potential the publisher was looking for. Following the success of *Medal of Honor: Allied Assault* (2015 Games 2002), published by

competitor Electronic Arts, the first *Call of Duty* game followed the popular World War II theme and proved to be a genuine hit.

The *Call of Duty* series did evolve thematically over time by switching locales and historical settings. *Call of Duty 4: Modern Warfare* (Infinity Ward and Treyarch 2007) proved to be a successful break with the obligatory Normandy beach landings and the umpteenth assault on Berlin, and it sold more than 13 million copies worldwide.⁵ After a brief return to the Second World War with *Call of Duty: World at War* (Treyarch 2008), the monetary value and sequel potential of the franchise was cemented once and for all by the spectacular launch of *Call of Duty: Modern Warfare 2* (Infinity Ward 2009), revenues for which topped \$550 million in five days and reached the elusive goal of becoming a “billion dollar title” (Brightman 2009a, 2009b). *Modern Warfare 2* generated as much revenue as the previous five major installments combined and went on to sell an unprecedented 20 million units against an installed base, at the time, of 55 million seventh-gen consoles.⁶

The annualization strategy worked well for *Call of Duty* as each additional franchise installment signaled revenue growth compared against previous releases. The rigid, well-planned publishing tempo is indicative of the rationalized nature of the production and circulation of Triple-A games. From 2005 onwards gamers could, and probably still can, expect a November release of a *Call of Duty* sequel. In a conference call with analysts from major investment companies, Kotick succinctly summarized the political economy of franchising: “[...] I think one of the great benefits of having a portfolio with 10 multi-million unit selling franchises is that you can expect virtually every one of those properties will be exploited on an annual or close to annual basis” (Kotick 2007). Apart from annual exploitation, the publisher has become increasingly skillful in extending the Triple-A commodity via the recurrent release of downloadable content.

Branched serialization

Typically, a Triple-A game is developed, published, and marketed as a disc-based, discrete, physical good, sold at retail. But in between waiting for the inevitable sequel and in order to extend the longevity of a title, there are software modules that can be acquired either via the Xbox Live Marketplace or Playstation Store, and which add onto or tie into the core game. The development and publishing of these modules constitute what I call the “branched serialization” formatting strategy, which breaks down into three complementary sub-strategies—free DLC, user-created content (UCC), and paid-for DLC—all of which are designed to extend the primarily physically distributed disc-based copy.⁷

Since the rise of networked PCs, the distribution of additional, free material has been a familiar part of game culture. During the seventh cycle publishers leveraged free DLC by offering premiums to those consumers who bought new games in stores (instead of secondhand), thereby rewarding such “good behavior” with DLC only available to the original owner.⁸ Other instances of free DLC are meant to extend the longevity of a multiplayer title, maintain customer loyalty, or serve as a tie-in with advertisements (e.g. free DLC codes on soda cans). A second category of gratis DLC concerns digitally distributed user-created content. This sub-genre has its roots

in PC game culture as well, although UCC is far less dominant compared to the golden ages of PC “modding” (cf. Postigo, 2007). Only a small number of seventh-gen Triple-A titles offer free UCC; think of *Little Big Planet* (2008), *ModNation Racers* (2010), or *Guitar Hero: World Tour* (2008). Console-based UCC is far less comprehensive in scope and scale compared to the intricate total-conversion modifications afforded by PC game publishers (Nieborg & Van der Graaf 2008).

More so than free DLC and user-created content, it is the availability of paid-for DLC that redefined the Triple-A commodity form. For the *Call of Duty* series, the seeds for the branching strategy were planted when the first installment, a PC game, was branched out a year after its release by the *Call of Duty: United Offensive* (Gray Matter Interactive 2004) expansion pack, visualized in figure 1 by the cross-hatched hexagon. The *Call of Duty* franchise's switch to the console spelled the end of user-created content and expansion packs as dominant formatting strategies, and marked the birth of a new modality of cultural production. The *Call of Duty* franchise was among the first series to popularize so-called map packs, a sub-genre of paid-for DLC particular to the genre of first-person shooters.⁹ A map pack is a collection of multiplayer maps that is generally sold at a price far lower than the stand-alone game or than expansion packs. Figure 1 shows the release of map packs (indicated by the diamond shaped extensions) for *Call of Duty 2* (Infinity Ward 2005) consisting of the free “Bonus Pack,” the PDLC *Skirmish Pack* (May 10), and the PDLC *Invasion Pack*, released June 29, 2006.

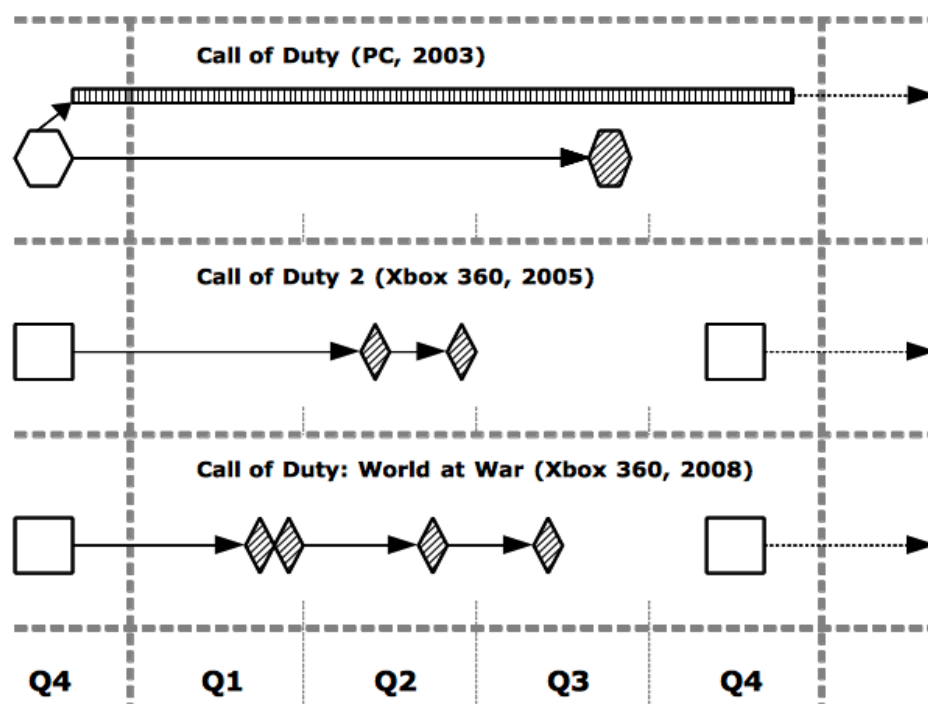


Figure 1: *Call of Duty* and the branched serialization formatting strategy

Now many years into the seventh cycle, the branched serialization formatting strategy appears to have been very much work-in-progress. Early in the seventh cycle the availability of paid-for DLC seems to have been an afterthought by publishers, and initial offerings had an experimental character in terms of price, size, and function. The irregular DLC releases of *Call of Duty 2* demonstrate that early in the seventh console cycle Activision Blizzard was still experimenting with the most effective mixture of packs (free versus paid), the right price (400 or 800 Microsoft Points for two maps), as well as the right release timing (two packs during the second quarter versus multiple packs spread out over different quarters). The experimental approach to PDLC publishing is confirmed by Activision Blizzard president Michael Griffith a month after the 2007 launch of *Call of Duty 4: Modern Warfare*: “Keep in mind we are still just scratching the surface in this area but we expect to see continued growth and emerging opportunities over the long run” (Seeking Alpha 2008b).

After a considerable time of experimentation, *Call of Duty: World at War* (2008) serves as a clear example of a well timed, uniformly priced mode of circulation. This is acknowledged by Griffith six months after his previous statement: “[We] have a significantly more robust program in place than last year when it comes to downloadable content for sale in the months ahead for [*Call of Duty: World at War*], building on our successful launch of the one map pack we fielded for *Call of Duty Modern Warfare* last year” (Seeking Alpha 2008a). The fifth major installment in the franchise offered four map packs, strategically launched in the first quarter of 2009 (March 5 and 19), the second quarter (June 11), and the third quarter (August 6).¹⁰ At no point in the franchise’s history did Activision decide to publish paid-for DLC after the release of the next installment in the series, arguably in order to prevent gamers from spending their money on “cheaper” DLC and to have them migrate *en masse* to a sequel. In the summer of 2009, Activision Blizzard could boast that it sold more than eight million maps packs during the seventh cycle (Seeking Alpha 2009b).

For Activision, the *Call of Duty* map packs had a number of notable monetary benefits: 1) they extended the shelf life of the stand-alone product as well as its marketing campaign as game magazines and news websites are known to dutifully report on their release; 2) packs decrease the need to trade-in a used version of the game as replayability is heightened by way of new content (the “keeping the disc in the tray” argument); and 3) the publisher is able to “hold pricing longer”—that is, rather than dropping prices as is common for older games, additional content keeps the game in demand and keeps prices close to the initial suggested retail price.¹¹ In addition, digitally distributing additional content means there are no sales return risks; a player cannot return a map pack to a store and get his or her money back.¹² Also, DLC in general can be used as a tool to combat piracy, as online consoles are more prone to counter-measures by platform holders (compared to offline consoles which cannot download additional material). And, last but not least, because of the networked nature of seventh-gen consoles, by digitally distributing PDLC publishers can get a better view of who their customers are, what kinds of PDLC they buy when, and sometimes even why.

The analysis of the anatomy of the *Call of Duty* franchise demonstrates that the rules of play for Triple-A games are as much governed by a game's internal ludic properties as they are structured and alternated by a distinctive and very explicit market logic. A Triple-A game is a cultural commodity first and foremost, and this has

a structuring effect on its cultural form, giving way to two distinctive formatting strategies. Following critical theory and critical political economy, the serialization strategy underlying the game franchise is a dominant strategy and should be seen as the epitome of conformity and standardization. The Triple-A commodity form is rooted in a complex and contradictory set of material conditions that are commonly perceived as natural or taken-for-granted by scholars, game journalists and gamers alike. As critical theorist Shane Günster (2004, p.238) observes: “The commodity form is nestled in all aspects of cultural experience, where it has acquired a curious sort of immunity from critical reflection.” Notwithstanding a number of valuable critical interventions by scholars in the field of game studies (Kerr 2006, Kline et al. 2003, Dyer-Witheford and De Peuter 2009, Dymek 2010), there is a high level of conformity when it comes to discussing the console game's commodity status.

This is not to say that a Triple-A game's cultural form can only be understood through economics. Rather, I would argue that it is impossible to discuss the nature of playing console games in the next-gen era without acknowledging proprietary game technology as well as the implications of the process of commodification, which shapes the form, format, delivery, and in the end the very act and nature of digital play itself. The rise of the hybrid console cycle demonstrates the resilience of a capital-intensive, for-profit modality of cultural production, mixing a twentieth-century investment logic with twenty-first century technological affordances such as digital distribution. A focus on the Triple-A game as a product, then, is an example of how cultural commodities are constantly repositioned and continuously altered during subsequent console cycles.

Conclusion

What, then, are the implications of the fact that a significant part of today's ludic expressions take place within proprietary and corporate contexts? The dominance of franchising combined with the ubiquitous availability of DLC signals a distinctive technological as well as economic feature of the seventh generation console game, combining the logic of serialization with the additional digitally distributed material that ties directly into, and thus extends, the core artifact. There are patches, (content) packs, game modes, and various other kinds of extra components or modules to prolong the magic—that is, until the sequel comes out and the entire process of anticipation, acquisition, and extended consumption starts all over again. In this sense, the next-gen Triple-A game never truly feels like it is finished; it is marketed by game publishers and positioned by critics as an unfinished commodity. In many ways, games are uniquely suited for their unfinished commodity status, because game-based seriality is “both more far-reaching in scope and more fundamentally anchored in the media, the platforms, and the practices of digital gameplay” compared to non software-based media such as television (Denson and Jahn-Sudmann 2013, p.2).

To put digital seriality in a political economic perspective, I should note that as the seventh generation of consoles once again raised the bar in terms of production values, the process of commodification systematically created significant material inequalities, severely constraining the output (both qualitatively and quantitatively) of any Triple-A game and restricting it to a publisher-driven, capital-intensive form of

production.¹³ The most troubling aspect of commodification is that any alternative mode of cultural production not congruent with this particular instance of production is frustrated, seized upon, or literally destroyed. In this sense the process of commodification is inherently self-perpetuating as it “reduces the resources, the time, and the space available to alternatives, so that commodification is perceived not as a process of power but as the natural order, common-sense, taken-for-granted reality of social life” (Mosco 2009 p.144). Similarly, the formatting strategies of franchising and branched serialization have swiftly become an accepted, natural element of contemporary game culture. Game reviewers routinely speak of the “inevitable sequel” while PDLC offerings, especially for the biggest blockbusters, have become not so much taken-for-granted, but are eagerly anticipated by consumers and many game critics as “part of the game.”

However, by accepting the current status quo and by taking the current mode of Triple-A production at face value, one overlooks the cultural, political, and ideological implications of this particular economic arrangement. Next to considering what gets developed, it is equally relevant to recognize what is *not* developed:

This path to an authentic ‘clone culture’ which replicates past successes can only increasingly standardize the production for and consumption by majorities, punishing innovative or minority creativity, that of small and medium enterprises, and linguistic and cultural minorities, thereby jeopardizing the overall ecology of each sector. (Bustamente 2004, pp.804-805)

Similarly, White (2009, pp.2-3) laments the “stagnation of creativity within the game industry” exactly because of the combination of a risk-averse and for-profit agenda: “In producing derivative sequels and game clones, individual market entities with the power and capital to innovate often engage in economic rent-seeking behaviour.” In summary, the seventh-gen solidified a publishing strategy that launches new, preferably wholly owned, intellectual properties early in a console cycle, in order subsequently to “exploit” said franchises annually *ad infinitum* and to experiment annually, within very specific (genre) boundaries, with a select number of new intellectual properties. Within a segment of the game industry that already manages its catalogue with an iron fist, this streamlining strategy does not bode well for those looking for original productions.

Despite its innovative technological character and the undeniable pleasure it grants to tens of millions of players, the Triple-A game’s unfinished commodity form, operationalized through two increasingly rigid formatting strategies, favors the continuity of formulaic themes and generic content. While it is expected of publicly traded transnational game publishers that they choose capital over creativity, and homogeneity in content over diversity, acknowledging this for-profit imperative and (unpacking the) commodity form should be part of the (scholarly) conversation on console games, not a taboo or an implicit assumption.

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Notes

- ¹ Because the Wii is marketed to a different audience and because of its non-HD capabilities, it adheres to a different set of market characteristics and follows a slightly different publishing logic and thus falls outside the scope of this paper.
- ² It should be noted that my approach neither replaces the valuable work done during the formative years of the field of game studies (e.g. Aarseth 2001, Mäyrä 2002, Copier & Raessens 2003), nor does it compete with similar work done today for that matter, but should be seen as a complementary critical point of view.
- ³ The subjective property of “better” is quantified by Riccitiello as critical acclaim measured on websites such as gamerankings.com and metacritic.com, which aggregate review scores from hundreds of online and offline game reviews.
- ⁴ Founded in 1979, Activision Publishing Inc. is considered to be the first independent third-party console game publisher (cf. Montfort and Bogost 2009). In 2008, the publisher merged with Blizzard Entertainment to form the holding company Activision Blizzard. Individual titles, such as the post-2008 installments of the *Call of Duty* franchise, however, are still published by Activision, which is now a subsidiary.
- ⁵ The 14 million mark was almost reached in August 2009 (Seeking Alpha 2009b).
- ⁶ A console’s installed base reflects the number of hardware units sold. These sales figures were announced by Activision CFO Thomas Tippl at 2010’s E3 summit (Strauss 2010).
- ⁷ The notion of “branching” signifies the dependency of extended material on the core game. Just as a tree branch is always attached to a tree, additional game

material can only be used together with the core game (or game technology). As such, the branching mode of seriality can be positioned between the “intra-ludic” and “inter-ludic” categories of seriality, as it is a category that manifests itself both within a game as well as between games (cf. Denson and Jahn-Sudmann 2013).

- ⁸ New games come with a unique code that can be used only once to acquire a specific piece of downloadable content.
- ⁹ One could argue that the sub-strategy of map packs has been explored by Electronic Arts’ first party development studio DICE. Apart from an expansion pack, the PC-based first-person shooter *Battlefield 2* (DICE 2005) offered two so-called “booster packs”—*Battlefield 2: Euro Force* (DICE 2006) and *Battlefield 2: Armored Fury* (DICE 2006)—consisting of additional weapons, classes, and maps. As such, the booster pack format, in terms of release timing, pricing, mode of distribution (digital only), and contents is strikingly similar to *Call of Duty*’s console-based paid-for map packs.
- ¹⁰ In contrast to the Playstation 3 and Xbox 360, PC gamers received the three map packs free of charge.
- ¹¹ This business rationale is explained by Griffith (Seeking Alpha 2009a): “Beyond direct accretive revenue generation, this extends our shelf life, helping to insulate us from the used game market and in turn allowing us to hold pricing longer.”
- ¹² This is codified in the Xbox Live Terms of Use: “All items purchased or rented from Xbox LIVE Marketplace, using the Web or your Xbox 360 console, are non-refundable. This includes subscriptions and all games, videos, and other digital goods. All sales are final” (Xbox.com 2010).
- ¹³ Note, my argument is purposely limited to the political economy of blockbuster games and therefore excludes digital-only titles solely distributed via Xbox Live Arcade and Playstation Network, many of which are distributed by smaller, independent studios.