

8. Alexander Galloway, "A Response to Graham Harman's 'Marginalia on Radical Thinking,'" *An und für sich*, June 3, 2012, <https://itself.blog/2012/06/03/a-response-to-graham-harmans-marginalia-on-radical-thinking/>.

9. Michael O'Rourke, "'Girls Welcome!!!': Speculative Realism, Object Oriented Ontology, and Queer Theory," *Speculations* 2 (2011): 278.

10. Ibid.

11. Katherine Behar, ed., *Object-Oriented Feminism* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2016).

12. In a blog post titled "I Am Not a Marxist: More on Politics and Philosophy," Ian Bogost suggests that he is unconcerned with politics as commonly invoked in academic discourse: "In these contexts, 'politics' is usually a code word for a very specific kind of Marxist leftism. The social justice of which Vitale and others speak is often just as exclusive of its opponents as it claims to be inclusive of marginalized groups. For me, the turn to objects is itself a part of the path toward a solution, of paying attention to worldly things of all sorts, from ferns to floppy disks to frogs to Fiat 500s. We can understand this attitude as an indictment of the very idea of 'politics' or 'social justice' itself" (*Ian Bogost*, June 29, 2010, [http://bogost.com/writing/blog/i\\_am\\_not\\_a\\_marxist/](http://bogost.com/writing/blog/i_am_not_a_marxist/), accessed March 6, 2017).

13. Lianne McLarty, "'Beyond the Veil of the Flesh': Cronenberg and the Disembodiment of Horror," in *The Dread of Difference: Gender and the Horror Film*, ed. Barry Keith Grant (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2015), 277.

14. Brenda Laurel, *Computers as Theatre* (New York: Addison Wesley, 2014), 2.

## THE LONG TALE OF DOWNLOADABLE CONVERGENCE

by Matthew Thomas Payne

The games industry crossed an auspicious threshold in 2014 when it became the first year that digital game sales eclipsed that of physical games.<sup>1</sup> This trend has continued, with the sales gap between digital and physical games only widening in subsequent years.<sup>2</sup> Furthermore, the total revenue of digital content—which includes full games, apps, subscriptions, and downloadable content—more than doubled that of game content on physical media in 2015 (\$11.2 billion compared to \$5.2 billion, respectively).<sup>3</sup> It's not terribly surprising that physical game sales are on the wane when considering the growing market for mobile games, the popularity of online services like PlayStation Network and Xbox Live, and expansive marketplaces like Steam and Good Old Games that are teeming with independent and remastered classics.<sup>4</sup> Although this may be a novel trend for video games, we've heard this story before. This is industrial déjà vu. Digital distribution transformed how we discover, buy, and collect music, just as it changed how we consume film and television. These broad media industry transformations are due, in no small part, to digital distribution and its "long tail."

Technology journalist Chris Anderson popularized this concept in a variety of publications and presentations, including his 2006 book *The Long Tail: Why the Future of Business Is Selling Less of More*. Anderson's term refers to the long, tail-like section of a distribution curve that depicts a lower frequency of demand as one moves away from the curve's big head to its diminishing tail. Anderson found that this particular graphic offered a revealing insight about how twenty-first-century, digitally aided businesses could—in the words of his book's title—"sell less of more."<sup>5</sup>

Anderson observed that the demand for nonpopular items could, in aggregate, exceed that of popular items. In other words, more demand existed for the many things in the long tail of a distribution curve than the few popular items at the head of said curve. This insight has been used to explain the success of companies like Amazon and Netflix that sell and stream eclectic fare. Moreover, because digital wares and distribution channels don't pose the same material costs to media producers as creating, replicating, and shipping physical goods, the long tail allows all manner of cultural production niches to become economically viable over time. In the

games industry, this economic paradigm not only permits new entrants into the market in the form of independent designers and publishers but also transforms how games can be conceptualized, produced, marketed, and delivered.

Not long ago, the term “downloadable content” (DLC) held a modicum of meaning. DLC most often referred to relatively minor add-ons that supplemented stand-alone titles, whether they were new levels or missions, cosmetic wares for avatars, or other items that provided some gameplay novelty. This is still the case today—well, at least sometimes. For example, producers regularly offer simple DLC as preorder bonuses to build excitement and help gauge commercial interest for a forthcoming title. DLC is also used for extending the life cycle of games, functioning as a bridging device to keep players entertained until a sequel hits store shelves. But even if we limit our scope of DLC to games alone (ignoring how other industries are adopting the concept), we find that DLC is increasingly eclectic in nature, varying considerably in form and purpose.

The term DLC is quickly losing its historical meaning because most gaming content now bypasses physical media. For example, DLC may refer to episodic content of a story-focused series like *The Walking Dead* or *Kentucky Route Zero*. DLC may also describe user-generated content that is crafted and shared in games like *Little Big Planet*, *Mario Maker*, and *Minecraft*. Less advertised but no less critical to DLC’s functionality are the backend updates and patches that piggyback on game expansions. The microtransactions of free-to-play (or “freemium”) game apps—all those twenty-five- and fifty-cent upgrades that are essential to their business models—comprise yet another (if perhaps more guilty) form of DLC. Looking back, PC gaming “shareware” that achieved popularity in the early to mid-1990s could retroactively qualify as proto-DLC. Indeed, as games journalist Jose Otero opines, “Video game makers have been selling DLC for years, but we still don’t have a standard expectation for add-on content.”<sup>6</sup>

Digital distribution’s long tail clearly enables game producers to expand DLC in form and in functionality. But DLC’s increasingly polyvalent constitution is not simply a technological consequence of digital distribution; rather, this altering form reflects broader changes in design practices and producer-user expectations. Today games are viewed less as stand-alone goods and more as ongoing services. In the nonconnected era of gaming, producers had little choice other than to embrace a “release and forget” mentality. There

was no recourse if a game shipped with busted code or with broken gameplay mechanics. Any innovations or upgrades would have to wait for the sequel, if there was one. Producers and gamers understood this fact. But now, like many other types of software, games are often distributed in “perpetual beta,” where postrelease refinement of code is expected.

Chris Anderson notes how he began seeing long tails come into focus in a host of contemporary industries: used goods on eBay, small advertisers using Google, specialty food goods at Whole Foods.<sup>7</sup> Skeptics have rightly questioned whether Anderson perpetuated a self-induced and self-fulfilling prophecy—one where the concept only *seemed* to explain broad shifts in modern consumer culture. Subsequent critiques have argued that the long tail failed to take hold as an empirical matter and that vertical integration and corporate consolidation are, in fact, causing it to retract and fragment.<sup>8</sup>

Setting aside criticisms about the long tail’s influence on other industries, we do know that DLC has proliferated in number (i.e., the amount available) and in kind (i.e., forms of DLC) thanks to digital distribution.<sup>9</sup> As I have previously argued, game studies needs to critically approach game distribution and marketing as key factors, rather than ad hoc considerations in the creation process.<sup>10</sup> This brief essay is a provisional attempt to understand how design opportunities are changing with digital distribution; specifically, how DLC extends narrative storylines and expands diegetic spaces within gameworlds. Simply put: in gaming, the long *tail* of digital distribution is changing the long *tale*, the long *trail*, and the long *sale* of DLC. I will leave it to others to create a more nuanced taxonomy of DLC’s emerging multiplicity of forms. For now, I want to examine how digital distribution is transforming game makers’ storytelling and world-building opportunities by focusing on DLC’s narrative and ludic functionality.

Despite long being framed as a proverbial side dish to the main course—or, more cynically, as a publisher-backed cash-grab aiming to eke more money out of a flagging title—DLC is an emblematic artifact of media convergence. These digital addendums occupy a space where the filmic, televisual, and gamic overlap. Generally speaking, there are two major types of story-focused DLC: one that emphasizes narrative seriality, and another that builds on narrative space.

Borrowing its storytelling structure from long-form television and radio series, *serial narrative DLC* installments build sequentially over time. We can call this approach the “long

tale” of DLC. For instance, Telltale Games’ “point and click”-style franchises offer prime examples of DLC as a narrative series. Following the successful adaptation of *The Walking Dead* comic and TV property, Telltale Games grew its studio by creating similarly stylized versions of popular intellectual property borrowed from the world of games (*Tales from the Borderlands*, *Minecraft: Story Mode*), film (*Batman*), and television (*Law and Order: Legacies*, *Game of Thrones*). In these titles, players make moral decisions and explore branching storylines. Many of these games limit the time and information available to players for even the most difficult decisions. Experientially, the gameplay is more akin to a controllable television show where one can inhabit characters’ headspaces over many hours of serialized gameplay (tellingly, their series are organized into episodes and seasons). This genre does not privilege quick-twitch control typical of shooters, the open exploration of space typical of sandbox games, or toying with gameplay mechanics offered by role-playing games. This franchise and others like it include *Kentucky Route Zero*, *The Detail*, *Life Is Strange*, and *Dead Synchronicity*.

The second subcategory of story-focused DLC is *world-building content*, which grows an existing world by adding modular material to it (e.g., storylines, characters, levels, assets, etc.). We can label this the “long trail” of DLC. World-expanding DLC grants players with new stories for an established diegetic universe where players are freer to discover and engage events in an order of their choosing. Here, strict linear progression of narrative temporality is secondary to the exploration of the game’s story map.<sup>11</sup> For instance, the DLC for the *Grand Theft Auto*, *Far Cry*, *The Witcher*, *Fallout*, and *Borderlands* series contains campaign quests with recommended sequences of completion. However, players can tackle quests in an order of their choosing and either skip or unknowingly miss some side missions. Thus, world-building DLC shifts how players experience those narratives. Said differently, in sacrificing narrative tightness, world-building DLC promotes a greater sense of serendipity and discovery—the joy of stumbling upon an emergent happening that can be engaged or ignored.

Furthermore, because the story is not always tethered to a singular experiential pathway, story space can be reimaged in new and interesting ways in world-building DLC. The DLC for *The Witcher 3* introduces new crafting systems that change how the player fights, which in turn affects how the player completes story quests. *Grand Theft Auto IV*’s DLC changes

the player’s perspective by giving him or her new player characters with competing agendas. The DLC for the *Borderlands* franchise features the main campaign’s peripheral characters, imbuing them with new humor and life. And DLC for *Red Dead Redemption* reimagines the classic American West as a zombie-filled nightmare.

A third category of DLC might be dubbed the “long sale” for the way that it tries to create a metagame of content collection. Although this term could apply to any DLC set that seeks to extend a franchise over time, the long sale is named as such because it refers to DLC-like gaming supplements that are sold in stores and crafted to be collected by avid fans. The best examples of this paradoxical-sounding physical DLC are toys-to-life (TTL) games. TTL franchises—the most popular lines being Activision’s *Skylanders*, Warner Brothers’ *LEGO Dimensions*, and Nintendo’s amiibo figures—feature collectible toys that typically interact with a computer or video game through a “portal” device (i.e., using radio frequency identification or a near field communication device), which unlocks content such as playable characters, upgrades, gameworlds, and storylines.

One might reasonably push back against framing TTL as DLC, since these figures usually unlock content rather than function as a significant source of data; they are more akin to a digital key than downloadable material. But this technical point misses a larger design truth. The expanding narratives and ludic spaces made possible by TTL figures mirror those of traditionally accessed DLC. More impressively, and as TTL firms with popular character rosters know, consumers will often collect these figures without connecting them to their games. Thus, toys-to-life are long sale DLC because they have a literal “shelf life”—one that begins in retail stores and ends in homes, sometimes bypassing the game console entirely.

For all of its variation, DLC is an opportunity, not a panacea. Mismanaged rollouts and lack of support for downloadable content offer object lessons in the limits of digital distribution—what we might playfully call the “long fail” of DLC. For example, small add-ons for the cartoonish shooter *Gotham City Imposters* were released before the game’s launch, inadvertently foregrounding Warner Brothers’ ham-fisted business model. The cancellation of Disney’s TTL line of *Disney Infinity* toys and the shuttering of its game servers meant that community features were terminated for console versions, while PC and iOS versions became unplayable, leaving some gamers to play with nothing but the physical

figures. Finally, *Destiny: The Taken King* was a fairly well-received expansion pack for the first-person shooter *Destiny*. However, those players who avoided the optional expansion missed out on previously available gameplay modes following a mandatory update. What was downloadable content for some effectively became subtractive content for others.

The long tail of digital distribution perpetuates the historical tale of media convergence by opening up new narrative opportunities to producers—whether they further expand sprawling worlds or weave complex stories—even as it complicates efforts to pin down with precision what is meant by downloadable content. DLC, for some time now, has been moving from the periphery of game production to its center as all manner of gaming content sheds its plastic casing. DLC is a reminder to game scholars to attend to marketing and distribution in their analyses of games and to figure out how to hold on to increasingly ephemeral content that is layered over and over again by the growing long tail of digital downloads.

---

#### About the Author

**MATTHEW THOMAS PAYNE** is an assistant professor in the Department of Film, Television, & Theater at the University of Notre Dame. His research interests include the cultural history of video games and interactive entertainment and teaching media literacy. He is author of *Playing War: Military Video Games after 9/11* (NYU Press, 2016) and is a coeditor of the anthologies *Flow TV: Television in the Age of Media Convergence* (Routledge, 2011) and *Joystick Soldiers: The Politics of Play in Military Video Games* (Routledge, 2010).

---

#### Notes

1. Entertainment Software Association, *The 2016 Essential Facts about the Computer and Video Game Industry*, April 2016, 13, <http://essentialfacts.theesa.com/Essential-Facts-2016.pdf>.

2. There was a 4 percent difference in 2014 and a 12 percent point spread in 2015.

3. Entertainment Software Association, *The 2016 Essential Facts*, 12.

4. The growing market for mobile games in particular is staggering, exceeding the revenue of the global box office and music industry. See Dig Om, "Mobile Games Brought in More Revenue in 2016 Than PCs and Console Games," *iPhone Life Magazine*, February 20, 2017, <http://www.iphonelife.com/content/mobile-games-brought-more-revenue-2016-pcs-and-console-games>.

5. Chris Anderson, *The Long Tail: How the Future of Business Is Selling Less of More* (New York: Hyperion, 2006).

6. Jose Otero, "Opinion: Zelda's Season Pass Suggests More DLC in Nintendo's Future," *IGN*, February 15, 2017, <http://www.ign.com/articles/2017/02/15/opinion-zeldas-season-pass-suggests-more-dlc-in-nintendoas-future>.

7. Anderson, *The Long Tail*, 10.

8. Philip M. Napoli, "Requiem for the Long Tail: Towards a Political Economy of Content Aggregation and Fragmentation," *International Journal of Media & Cultural Politics* 12, no. 3 (September 2016): 341–56.

9. Anderson doesn't spend much time in his book discussing games, but he does note that the long tail gives new life to older game libraries: "fun or nostalgia downloadable and playable for a small fee" (*The Long Tail*, 97).

10. See Matthew Thomas Payne and Gregory Steirer, "Redesigning Game Industries Studies," *Creative Industries Journal* 7, no. 1 (2014): 67–71.

11. Michael Nitsche coined the idea of the "story map"—how narrative and cultural discourse gets mapped over constructions of virtual spaces; see Michael Nitsche, *Video Game Spaces: Image, Play, and Structure in 3D Worlds* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2008).

---

#### A CALL TO ACTION FOR VIDEO GAME STUDIES IN AN AGE OF REANIMATED WHITE SUPREMACY

by TreaAndrea M. Russworm

One of the first things I was scheduled to do the morning after the November 2016 presidential election was give a public lecture about video games to students on my campus. My lecture, which had been on the schedule long before Election Day, was supposed to be about how my original areas of research expertise (African American popular culture with an emphasis on film and media) have informed the ways in which I now primarily teach and write about video games.

I awoke that morning with sharp pangs of disassociation and dread but not exactly surprise as I discussed the significance of the election results with colleagues, friends, and family. Surely a presidential campaign that openly catered to white nationalists by promoting exclusion, violence, and fear would have a direct impact on the lives of our communities en masse. Most people I talked to that morning were busy strategizing and thinking through some of the immediate consequences for the country's most vulnerable populations that were directly targeted during the campaign: African Americans, Muslims,