

**A TRAP, “JUST FINE”, OR A STEPPING STONE TO GAMBLING ADDICTION:  
THE DISCOURSES OF VIDEO GAME LOOT BOXES**

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<p>Abstract</p> <p>Videopelien mikrotransaktiot ovat herättäneet paljon keskustelua peliyhteisöissä niiden ensiesiintymisestä nykypäivään asti. Aiheen tiimoilta on tehty paljon tutkimuksia, erityisesti talouden puolelta (Ball &amp; Fordham 2018; Davidovici-Nora 2013; Tomić 2017; Tomić 2019), mutta itse mikrotransaktioista käytyjä keskusteluja ei ole tutkittu laajasti.</p> <p>Tämä tutkielma tarkasteli kolmea ns. loot boxeja, mikrotransaktioiden yhtä muotoa, käsittelevää artikkelia diskursianalyysin keinoin. Tutkimuksen tarkoituksena oli selvittää, millaisia isompia ideoita, eli diskursseja, teksteistä löytyy ja kuinka ne ilmenevät. Švelchin (2017) artikkeli mikrotransaktioiden diskursseista toimi analyysin pohjana diskursianalyysin ohella.</p> <p>Analyysin tuloksena teksteistä löytyi Švelchin (2017) nimeämien diskurssien lisäksi myös muita diskursseja, jotka liittyvät mikrotransaktioiden muodoista nimenomaan loot boxeihin niihin sisältyvän sattumanvaraisuuden takia. Nimesin nämä diskurssit uhkapeli- ja riippuvaisuusdiskursseiksi. Nämä kaksi diskurssia tulivat esiin jokaisessa artikkelissa kirjoittajien positiivisista tai negatiivisista mielipiteistä huolimatta, mikä kertoo loot boxien luontaisen sattumaisuuden ongelmista.</p> <p>Tutkielman tulosten perusteella loot boxit näyttäytyvät kiistanalaisena aiheena, joka jakaa peliyhteisöä. Tutkimuksen tuloksista voi olla hyötyä esimerkiksi peliyhtiöille, jotka haluavat tietää, mitä peliyhteisö ajattelee loot boxeista.</p>	
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## 1 INTRODUCTION

Microtransactions, meaning in-game purchases of virtual goods with real money, have been a consistent source for player uproar and complaints in the gaming industry ever since their introduction in free-to-play games in the early 2000s. Such uproars have only been gaining more steam after microtransactions were brought into traditional full-price games, starting with cosmetic horse armor in the 2006 game *The Elder Scrolls IV: Oblivion* (Williams 2017). Microtransactions themselves are varied, but very lucrative. The economic effects of microtransactions business models have been studied a lot, and the gaming community's general dislike of the practice is often cited in these studies (Tomić 2019:20; Ball & Fordham 2018). Loot boxes have also been studied a lot recently, as many members of the legal and gaming communities consider them to be a form of gambling, and want to reclassify them as such (Carvalho 2020).

Unfortunately, there are not a lot of studies on the linguistic side, even less studies focusing specifically on how microtransactions are discussed in the gaming community and beyond. Jan Švelch's 2017 paper used a framework of critical discourse analysis to study the discourses around the acceptance and rejection of microtransactions in mainstream video games. His findings indicate that the most widespread discourse was that of complete rejection of all microtransactions. This is reinforced by how often one can see microtransactions brought up in the headlines of articles on gaming news sites and forums. However, Švelch's (2017) study focused on all forms of microtransactions, not distinguishing between different types, such as loot boxes or season passes. This leaves a gap in the research, where discourses specific to a single type of microtransaction, or differences in how common discourses appear

in discussions focused on only one type of microtransaction, could be found. The aim of this study is to start filling this gap by focusing on a single type of microtransaction, loot boxes, to see what loot box specific discourses can be found. But first, we must dive deeper into the world of video games to define what microtransactions and loot boxes actually are.

## **2 MICROTRANSACTIONS IN VIDEO GAMES**

Video games as a cultural phenomenon have been rising in popularity ever since their introduction. From the old arcade machines in bars to the new fancy gaming consoles right at home, video games have always provided entertainment for anyone who needs it. People of all ages play video games, and though gamers have always been stereotyped to be male in majority, recent developments prove otherwise. According to the Entertainment Software Association, in 2020 64% of adults and 70% of children in the U.S. are video game players, out of whom 59% are male and 41% female (ESA 2020). A majority of Americans play video games, which means that there are great amounts of money moving around because of them. In 2018, the US video game industry earned 43.4 billion dollars in revenue, a record high, showing a growth of 18% from the previous year (ESA n.d.). This growth does not seem to be stopping soon either, with a report expecting the industry's value to exceed \$200 billion in 2023 (Juniper Research 2020, cited in Gardner 2020). Microtransactions are a big part of that revenue and growth generated by video games. For example, in the fiscal year 2017 more than half of large video game publisher Activision Blizzard's revenue came from microtransactions alone (Tomić 2019). Thus, microtransactions are a very important part of the current video game scene and will most likely continue their prevalence in the future.

### **2.1 What are microtransactions?**

To explain what microtransactions are, we must first understand how games are monetized. The original basic revenue principle for video game companies was to sell the entire content once, with the buyer receiving the whole game for a one-time purchase (Tomić 2019).

Microtransactions have always been an integral part of games that follow the free-to-play formula, in which the base game is free for everyone, and the game is monetized through in-game purchases, making microtransactions the main source of revenue for such games (Davidovici-Nora 2013). The success of these games as well as mobile games riddled with microtransactions brought the business model to the traditional full-priced games as a way to give developers and publishers more ways to earn revenue from games after the initial purchase (Švelch 2017). Though the addition of microtransactions to full-priced games has been received negatively and has continued to be a hot topic in games media (Švelch 2017), the shift in video games from one-time purchase business model to favoring microtransactions to earn revenue has been on-going for years now (Tomić 2017).

Microtransactions, as defined by Tomić (2017: 241), are “payments for purchasing the additional content for video games”. The name refers to how microtransactions were originally priced cheap, ranging from cents to a few dollars, though Tomić (2017: 241) makes a distinction between microtransactions and micropayments. On the one hand, micropayments is a term that includes “all low amount payments, regardless of the payment purpose” (Tomić 2017: 241). Microtransactions, on the other hand, though often (but not always) belonging to the category of micropayments in terms of the payment’s amount, are more determined by the purpose of the purchase, instead of the amount (Tomić 2017). Some microtransactions, such as new campaigns or story missions for the game, can reach the price of a full game, like the 50-dollar downloadable content (DLC) for *Dead Space 3* (Tomić 2017; Tomić 2019).

There are many different forms of microtransactions, such as cosmetic upgrades, in-game advantages, and new DLC but all of them are considered to be extra content separate from the full game, thus necessitating a separate purchase (Tomić 2017, Tomić 2019). Microtransactions that give direct in-game advantages for players who choose to purchase them have been received with the most negativity, causing the biggest uproar in gaming communities, with games containing such microtransactions being labeled as “pay-to-win” -games (Tomić 2019). Such microtransactions are almost universally rejected, with other forms of microtransactions receiving a more divisive reception from the community at large (Tomić 2019; Švelch 2017).

The way in which microtransactions are implemented in a game also differs. Some games give players the option of directly purchasing the content or items they desire, while others tie them to other forms of content by selling them in a bundle, as seen in the “season pass” -model of microtransactions (Švelch 2017). Some games do not take real money at all in-game, instead taking payments only in the form of virtual currency, a form of “electronic money used in an enclosed virtual community” (Tomić 2019: 20), as an intermediary. Such money can either be earned through gameplay, or by purchasing pre-defined packages of the currency with real money (Tomić 2019). Other games have chosen to bring an element of randomness to their microtransactions, by locking the optional bonus content behind chance-based mechanics. These mechanics are commonly referred to as loot boxes, which will be discussed in more detail in the following chapter.

## **2.2 Loot boxes**

The loot box model originated in the Asian market (Williams 2017), but they quickly spread to the Western market as well. Loot boxes have gained popularity throughout the years with developers and publishers, as according to a University of York research (cited in Hamilton 2020), in 2019, 71% of the top games on a popular gaming platform Steam contained loot boxes, and as such they are the second most used model of microtransactions (Tomić 2019: 20). The exact form they take varies from game to game, but what unites them all is the element of randomness. Through in-game progression, in-game currency, or real money, the player is rewarded with a mystery box filled with in-game items, such as cosmetics or new weapons for your character. The reward is random, so players cannot know what they will get when they earn or purchase a loot box (Tomić 2019). In many games, direct purchases of items might not exist at all, leaving loot boxes as the only way of getting extra items for use. Though in many games players are rewarded for their in-game progression with loot boxes, the best and fastest way to get the items you want is of course by purchasing loot boxes with real money. For example, just with a few dollars, a player can purchase a single loot box in the game *Overwatch*, whereas to earn one through gaining experience points by playing the game would take a player around 84 minutes (Friedman 2016).

The items gained through opening loot boxes usually belong to different rarity tiers, meaning that the odds of getting different items from a loot box changes with the item's tier of rarity. Of course, the rarer the item, the better and more desirable it is, and the more difficult it is to attain. For example, to get a single item from the rarest tier of items, the 'legendary' -tier, in the game *Overwatch*, one must attain many loot boxes, as legendary items appear once every 13.5 loot boxes (Frank 2017).

This element of randomness is the main focus of the discussions surrounding loot boxes. The fact that a player cannot know what they get when purchasing a loot box, is the main reason why some consider them to be a form of gambling, or at least a potential stepping-stone on the way to a gambling addiction (Straub 2020; Tomić 2019). A survey of 1500 UK adults (cited in Henry 2020) found that 74% of respondents considered loot boxes in video games to be a form of gambling. This view is shared by many politicians who want to reclassify loot boxes as a form of gambling, which would cause problems for the games that have them (Good 2017; Hall 2019).

Some countries, such as Japan, China, Netherlands, and Belgium have already taken stands on the issue of loot boxes as gambling by regulating their use in video games in different degrees (Straub 2020). The most drastic change was achieved in Belgium, where the regulations set for loot boxes lead to the complete removal of loot boxes from certain games, such as *Overwatch*, by the developers themselves (Marshall 2018), with other developers going as far as outright removing entire games from sale in Belgium (Straub 2020). China's regulations, though not quite as drastic, make the process of offering loot boxes in games fairer and more transparent by legally requiring those games that employ loot boxes or mystery mechanics to reveal the probabilities of receiving the different tiers of rewards available (Straub 2020; Frank 2017). Even in the USA, a bill has been proposed, calling for the regulation of loot boxes specifically in games with minors as their target audience (Hall 2019).

But as with any public outcry, there is always another side to the issue, with its own proponents. The Entertainment Software Association (ESA) came out and declared that loot boxes "are not gambling" in a statement provided to the gaming news website *Polygon* (Good 2017). They went on to bring up the voluntary nature of loot box mechanics, underlining player choice and agency, as the contents of loot boxes are not required to play the game and

find success in-game (Good 2017). Some proponents of loot boxes bring up the comparison of card packs, for various trading card games such as Pokémon or Magic: The Gathering, even going as far as calling them “the original loot boxes”, as in those games the cards are often sold in booster packs, and just like loot boxes, the buyer cannot know what they find in the pack before purchasing it (Coulson 2020). This comparison is used to delegitimize the idea of loot boxes as gambling, as the existence of card packs has not caused any similar outcries, even though they have been around far longer than loot boxes and are similarly available to children (Coulson 2020).

### **3 THE PRESENT STUDY**

#### **3.1 Aim and research questions**

The aim of my study is to use critical discourse analysis to learn what kind of discourses are usually found in online games journalism articles surrounding the topic of microtransactions, specifically loot boxes, in video games. To do this, I will be focusing on these research questions:

1. What kind of discourses are frequently found in online games and mainstream journalism surrounding the topic of loot boxes?
2. How are the discourses visible and how are they used in the texts?

#### **3.2 Data and methods**

The data for this study consists of 3 online articles from different websites. As loot boxes have been a hot topic in the gaming community for as long as they have existed, there was an abundance of articles to choose from for this study. The chosen articles were picked from different types of websites to get a broader picture of trends in the discourses surrounding loot boxes in video games. The first article is from the online news site Kotaku, which focuses on news and opinions about video games and other things that gamers might be interested in, representing the voice of the online video games community. The second article is from the business magazine Forbes, which brings a more positive, economics -focused view into the topic of loot boxes. The third article is a news article from the British Broadcasting

Corporation (BBC), which was chosen to show how more traditional mainstream news talks about the issue of loot boxes. All three chosen articles focus on the topic of loot boxes in video games, and each brings a somewhat different view of the issue.

The articles will be analyzed through the framework of discourse analysis as seen in Fairclough (2003), Jørgensen & Phillips (2002) and Machin & Mayr (2012). Discourse, as it is defined by Jørgensen & Phillips (2002: 1), means “a particular way of talking about and understanding the world (or an aspect of the world)”. Fairclough (2003:124) sees discourses as “ways of representing aspects of the world”, with different discourses being “different perspectives on the world” with the word ‘world’ in both quotes referring to the material world, the mental world of thoughts, as well as the social world. Different discourses are associated with different people, based on their situations, social and personal identities, and their relations with other people and the world (Fairclough 2003). According to Machin & Mayr (2012), meaning is also communicated through visual language, therefore the discourses of any given article should be visible in the included multimodal aspects. The author of the text chose to include multimodal elements for a reason, thus necessitating analysis into what any given multimodal element brings to the story and, why the element was specifically chosen for the text in question (Machin & Mayr 2012).

I will use the framework of discourse analysis to learn about the discourses found in the articles, and what that tells about the way loot boxes are discussed. First, I will identify the different discourses found in the articles, explain what they are, and how they can be seen in the text. Second, I will analyze the language and lexical choices to see how loot boxes are discussed: in a positive or negative way. Third, I will look into the multimodal aspects of the articles: pictures, videos, links, and see how they contribute to the text. In the end, I will compare the articles to each other to see what kind of differences or similarities can be found in the discourses and language choices from article to article.

## 4 ANALYSIS

To identify the discourses in the chosen articles I used the findings of Jan Švelch's 2017 article "Playing with and against Microtransactions: The Discourses of Microtransactions Acceptance and Rejection in Mainstream Video Games" as a starting point. Švelch's discourses of *unacceptability*, *diversification*, *cosmetics*, and *compensation* were also found in the articles chosen for this study. Švelch found the discourse of unacceptability to be the most widespread and common reaction to microtransactions. Just as its name proclaims, this line of thinking suggests that microtransactions are unacceptable in full-price video games. The players should not be asked for additional payments, as they have already purchased the game for the full price, usually from 40USD to 60USD. The optionality of microtransactions is seen as disingenuous and manipulative, as its only goal is to motivate the players to eventually cave in by exploiting the "the lure of instant gratification and impulse purchasing" (Švelch, 2017: 10).

According to Švelch, the discourse of diversification sees the issue of optionality from a different point of view. The time-saving possibilities of microtransactions are welcomed, as long as the players are free to choose whether to engage with the microtransactions or not. This stance sees microtransactions as acceptable, and it is therefore in opposition to the discourse of unacceptability.

The discourse of cosmetics and the discourse of compensation are more specific than the previous ones. Both discourses suggest that microtransactions can be acceptable, but only when they align with some specific rule. The discourse of cosmetics sees that microtransactions are acceptable if they offer only cosmetic upgrades, and thus have no actual

effect on the gameplay itself. This discourse completely rejects any and all microtransactions that provide any sort of gameplay advantages. The discourse of compensation on the other hand, sees microtransactions as acceptable if their inclusion is “compensated for the players ... mostly in the form of free DLC.” (downloadable content) (Švelch, 2017: 13). This discourse sees that those who invest in microtransactions are funding the development of free DLC, from which the entire player community benefits. The proponents of this discourse are usually, but not always, the players who do not invest in microtransactions themselves. (Švelch, 2017.)

Though the discourses identified by Švelch were a great tool in the analysis, they were not enough to give a full view of the discourses found, as his study gave a broader, more general view of microtransactions. As this study focuses on loot boxes specifically, there were some loot box -specific discourses that were present in some way in all of the articles, and quite prominent in some of them, thus necessitating their analysis. As discussed in the background section of this study, most of the discussion surrounding loot boxes focuses on their inherent element of randomness. This element of randomness is the focus of two different but intertwined discourses which could be identified in the data. I call these discourses the discourse of *gambling*, and the discourse of *addiction*.

The discourse of gambling follows the question whether loot boxes are gambling or not, and it is usually, but not always, tied to a negative view of both gambling and loot boxes. The fact that players cannot know what rewards they receive when purchasing a loot box is seen as problematic, especially when real money is involved. The players and non-player individuals worried about gambling in games, such as parents, that can be seen as proponents of this discourse want loot boxes to be classified as a form of gambling, or at least regulated better by governments. They compare loot boxes to many forms of “real” gambling, such as slot machines. They often reference the politicians, lawmakers, and countries that share their opinion of loot boxes being gambling, as having any kind of an official entity agreeing with their viewpoint brings validity to their claims. These calls for government regulation and comparisons to “actual” gambling bring with them many issues, such as the question of *addiction*.

In my findings, when it comes to loot boxes, the discourse of addiction and the discourse of gambling are unequivocally tied together: if one pops up in an article, the other one is not far behind. The discourse of addiction reinforces the negative views of loot boxes and gambling, by bringing up the very serious real-world issue of addiction. Loot boxes are seen as equally addicting as casinos, slot machines, and other forms of “real” gambling, thus making “whales”, the players who spend huge amounts of money on loot boxes, gambling addicts. This gives a certain severity to the topic, showing that the issue is bigger than the video games that create it. The signifiers of this discourse include comparisons to other addictive substances (alcohol, drugs, gambling), word choices marking the issue as serious and bad, and personal anecdotes of loot box addiction. The proponents of this discourse usually try to appeal to the emotions of their audience by using the signifiers mentioned above.

These are the discourses I have identified in my data. Now, I will point out in detail how the discourses mentioned above can be found in the article data chosen for this study.

#### **4.1 Loot boxes seen as a purely negative thing**

The first article analyzed in this thesis is the 2017 article “Loot boxes are designed to exploit us” by Heather Alexandra from Kotaku, an online magazine focused on games and gaming news. The main discourse found in this article is the discourse of unacceptability, which becomes clear from just the title already. The lexical choices found in any text are a signifier of the discourses the author wants to express (Machin & Mayr 2012), meaning that the term “exploit” used in the title was chosen specifically to focus on the discourse of unacceptability. The term’s negative connotation shows the author’s own negative view of loot boxes and starts the article by framing the issue of loot boxes as something sinister and manipulative. Many similar words with negative connotations can be found in the rest of the article, showing that the author wants to portray the issue in a negative light. The rewards gained from loot boxes might be “a ton of garbage”, and loot boxes are described as a “temptation”, a “snare” and a “devious economic trap”, showing the author’s idea that loot boxes were

designed deliberately from the start to exploit players, a view shared by the proponents of the discourse of unacceptability in Švelch's (2017) findings. The usage of curse words in the article underlines the extremely negative view of loot boxes the author wants to portray. How loot boxes work "sounds shitty", and they are "designed to fuck you over".

Reinforcing the overall discourse of unacceptability found in the article is the discourse of gambling, and unequivocally tied to it, the discourse of addiction. The article touches briefly on the Entertainment Software Rating Board's (ESRB) decision that loot boxes are not gambling, which the author sees as "absurd". The usage of the word "absurd" implies that the reasoning behind such a decision can in no way be rational, making the ESRB's stance on the issue obviously wrong. The comparison of loot boxes to gambling comes up many times in the article. Loot boxes are directly compared to slot machines: "They're slot machines in everything but name", and the different in-game currencies are compared to the chips used at a casino. These comparisons underline the discourse of gambling, as they tie the topic of video game loot boxes to "real" gambling.

Gambling addiction, a very serious matter, is brought up in the text multiple times. The author frames the act of spending money on loot boxes as gambling, meaning that when that spending becomes too much, it becomes an issue of addiction. This brings severity to the topic of loot boxes, allowing the author to frame the issue as an "ethical problem" and a "moral issue", showing that the topic of loot boxes is not just a "gameplay issue or consumerist concern", but instead a serious issue of addiction.

The author backs up her claims of loot boxes being addictive by using one of the main signifiers of the discourse of addiction: anecdotes from her own life. The author's story of her own clashes with addictive loot boxes in different games reinforces the credibility of the discourse of addiction, as it is not just some hypothetical problem that could happen, but a real issue that the author has personal past experience with. The author starts by confessing that she has a gambling problem, which originated from loot boxes in games, which reinforces the author's assertion of loot boxes as gambling. The author explains how her addiction problem has moved from game to game, surfacing again in the next game even after breaking the habit in another game. This frames the topic as something not problematic in only a single game, but a serious issue in all games with loot box-like mechanics.

The multimodal elements, 3 pictures and 1 embedded video, of the article have been chosen to further reinforce the author's arguments. The article starts with a picture of a loot box from Overwatch, with a yellow glow emanating from its insides, which seems quite normal at first glance, but after reading the article, it becomes an obvious example of the devious way in which loot boxes are designed to be desirable. The embedded video later in the article shares a similar purpose, as it showcases other aspects used to make loot boxes desirable, such as music, animations and sound effects. The next picture shows an example of the horrendous drop rates that the different tiers of items can have in loot boxes, with the players having only a one percent chance of getting the rarest, and the most coveted, items. The third picture shows a tweet by the author, which has a screenshot of her phone, showing a notification from a mobile game advertising one free "summon", which is the specific mobile game's version of loot boxes. This highlights how the games lure players in by offering one free chance at getting the item they want, but when the results end up being disappointing, the player is already there, in the game, motivated to purchase more chances with their money. This is another view shared by the proponents of the discourse of unacceptability in Švelch's (2017) study.

## **4.2 Looking for the positive sides of loot boxes**

A somewhat different take can be found in the second article chosen for this thesis, Erik Kain's 2016 article "'Overwatch' Micro-Transactions Are Just Fine, And Way Better Than Paid DLC", which was published on the website of Forbes, a business magazine. This article takes an opposite stance to the topic of loot boxes than the previous article, which is already visible from the article's title. The title's declaration that loot boxes are "just fine and way better than paid DLC" already shows the main discourse prevalent throughout the whole text: the discourse of compensation.

The article is mainly a response to two other discussions criticizing the loot box system in the game Overwatch, with a mention of a third in the end. The main arguments of the two discussions are briefly summarized. The discourse of unacceptability as well as the

discourse of cosmetics comes through from this summary, with criticism leveled at how long it takes to gain loot boxes, which incentivizes spending money on them, and how even though the rewards from loot boxes are only cosmetic, it still impacts the enjoyment gained from playing the game. The word “lure” is used here in the summary, which implies that loot boxes are a trap that players have to be lured in to buy. These points are brought up as a starting point for the author’s own disagreeing opinion.

With the summary out of the way, the author starts to bring up his own viewpoint, which lines up with the discourse of compensation, with some elements of the discourse of cosmetics and the discourse of diversification rising up throughout. In multiple spots, the author shows how he thinks the inclusion of loot box microtransactions is a reasonable price to pay for getting free DLC for all players, calling it “more pro-consumer than paid DLC” and “a great situation for me and for most Overwatch players”. The spending of money for loot boxes is presented as effectively funding the development of free future DLC, which is seen as a positive thing. This view was one of Švelch’s (2017) signifiers for the discourse of compensation, and acts as a stark contrast to the way the first article presented loot boxes as a purely negative thing.

As Švelch (2017) noted, the proponents of the discourse of compensation are usually the ones who do not spend money on microtransactions themselves. This is true in the case of the author of this article. The author declares many times how he does not care for the loot boxes, and has spent no extra money on the game after the initial purchase, even using some foul language, the word “crap”, when describing loot boxes to underline how much he despises them. New content, such as new maps, heroes, game modes, and other things, are described as “cool stuff that really matters”, implying that loot boxes and the cosmetics found in them do not “really matter”. This can be seen either as the author stating his opinion of not caring once again, or as the author implying, that this statement is universally true, and thus loot boxes and cosmetics should not matter to anyone. All of this strengthens the narrative of compensation, as he does not benefit from the inclusion of loot box microtransactions, so he expects to be compensated in the form of free DLC.

The discourse of cosmetics is present in the article with the author always making sure that the word “cosmetic” is always present when talking about Overwatch’s loot

boxes. “Cosmetic micro-transactions seem like a much more pro-consumer move than paid DLC.”, with the word “cosmetic” there to make sure no one would think the author would be fine with microtransactions that affect gameplay balance. The article mentions multiple times, how leveling up, gaining loot boxes, and through them cosmetics, or purchasing loot boxes does not in any way give anyone an unfair advantage in the game.

The discourse of diversification comes through in the article with the author underlining the optionality of loot boxes, and the choice of players to spend their money on them. The loot box -system of the game is “entirely optional”, and “It’s not like anyone has to purchase this stuff”. Those who spend money on loot boxes are described as “willing”, supporting the “game they obviously love”, and the people doing this “actually enjoy doing so (even subconsciously.)”, thus framing the issue in a more positive light.

The discourses of gambling and addiction show up with this framing of spending money, even a lot of money, on loot boxes as a positive thing. The first article framed this issue as a serious issue of gambling addiction, but no trace of such a negative view can be found in this article. The issue of spending a lot of money is not seen at all as an actual problem, but instead, as the individual players’ choice, thus tying into the discourse of diversification. The big spenders are generally, and in this article, called “whales”, and they are described as “people with addictive personalities”, but where there usually would be a negativity linked to this description, here, it is seen as just a personality thing and not as a vulnerability to serious addiction. Positive words such as “love”, “vibrant”, “cool”, “fun” and “enjoy” are used to reinforce the view that spending money on loot boxes is enjoyed by those who do so, and that there is no issue of gambling or addiction.

### **4.3 A mainstream media approach to the issue of loot boxes**

BBC News’ 2020 article “Loot boxes: I blew my university savings gaming on Fifa” by Felicity Hannah and Jane Andrews is the third and final article chosen for this thesis. As with the previous articles, the main discourses found are once again evident from just the title, and they are the discourses of gambling and addiction. The article is the explanation of the video at the

top of the article, in which a teenager shares his personal story of addiction, of spending nearly 3000 pounds on loot boxes in the different soccer video games of Electronic Art's (EA) FIFA -series. The House of Lords Gambling Committee and their call for loot boxes to be regulated as gambling is mentioned multiple times, showing that it is not just the players themselves thinking that this issue is more serious than it has been treated as. The sharing of personal anecdotes and the referencing of officials who share the author's concerns of loot boxes being gambling are signifiers for the two loot box -specific discourses: the discourse of addiction for the former and the discourse of gambling for the latter.

The teenager's spending of money on loot boxes is framed as gambling in the article from the beginning to the end. The story starts with the teenager's father calling the random card packs, FIFA's form of loot boxes, gambling, which the teenager said originally caused "frustration", but with which he now agrees. The personal story of the teenager's spending habits growing and growing until they were out of control has the same effect as the text that was analyzed first, the Alexandra (2017) article, giving credibility to the claim that loot boxes should be considered gambling, since they are just as addictive as "real" gambling.

The different elements of the story underline the discourses of gambling and addiction. Opening a pack of cards made the teenager think "If I could just spend another £15...", and "this time would be one where I got lucky" which are common feelings experienced by gamblers. The habit of spending money was kept as a secret from the rest of the teenager's family, which aligns with many other addicts, such as alcoholics, wanting to keep their addiction secret because they are ashamed of it. The feeling of opening cards is described as "an escape" and a "buzz", and the practice of loot boxes is referred to as "utter exploitation", all word choices tying loot boxes to the discourse of addiction by using terminology usually associated with other addictions. The word "buzz", for example, is often associated with alcohol and its effects on the body, which brings forth the comparison to alcoholism. Similar reasoning behind the lexical choice can be found later, when the article strongly emphasizes that the teenager was not addicted to video games as such, but specifically loot boxes and their "buzz of chance".

The video at the top of the article aims at making people see the topic of loot boxes as a serious issue of addiction. In the video, the teenager looks straight into the camera as he recounts his story while somber music plays in the background. With these audio and visual elements as well as the caption "How one teenager spent nearly £3,000 on his "addiction" to video game loot boxes.", the video presents itself as the confession of an addict.

A comment from EA is found at the end of the story. This comment has elements of the discourse of diversification, as EA brings up the optionality of microtransactions, and how the games can be played without spending any money. EA states that they do not think loot boxes are gambling, but at the same time they acknowledge the issue of addiction. This, while denying the implications of the discourse of gambling, actually has somewhat of an opposite effect, as it still acknowledges that the issue of addiction is inherent in loot boxes.

## 5 DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

This paper has focused on the discourses that can be found in the discussions surrounding the issue of loot boxes in video games. Through the methods of critical and multimodal discourse analysis, the central discourses of the chosen articles were identified. The discourses of unacceptability, diversification, cosmetics, compensation, gambling, and addiction were all visible in some or all of the texts.

The most evident findings of the analysis indicate that the conversation surrounding loot boxes is inherently negative, as even the article with the most positive view on them talked about the criticisms against the system, and even referenced other articles with a more negative view. Though the articles differed in their opinion on the value of the loot box system, all three articles employed different discourses in very similar ways. Each article had one or two discourses that were absolutely central to the text, and the central discourse was always the one that most resembled the authors' own opinions on the issue of loot boxes. The central discourses were visible in the word choices, the multimodal elements, and the things the articles chose to talk about and focus on.

Outside of the central discourse of the texts, other discourses were also found. These other discourses were usually used to reinforce the point of the central discourse and the authors' opinions. On a few occasions, discourses opposing the central idea were found, but they were only brought up to be rebuked and rebutted by the author, which also strengthened the case of the central discourses.

As the data selection in this study was very small, it is not possible to draw any conclusions on the prominence of the different discourses found by Švelch in his 2017 study.

The only discourses that were visible in all three studies were the loot box specific discourses of gambling and addiction, as the inherent randomness of the loot box system and the current events in the gaming world necessitates some kind of reference to the issue.

This analysis was limited to only three texts, and as such, is no basis for any far-reaching generalizations. But even with its limitations, people in the games industry and different gaming communities might find interest in the findings of this study, as it gives some idea of what ideas and opinions are found in the discussions surrounding loot boxes. Further studies could be made to analyze more data from different sources to see the bigger picture of discourses in the discussions of microtransactions. Moreover, texts from games journalism websites are not the only possible data source for such a study. Online gaming forums see a lot of conversation on the topics of microtransactions, and the texts on such platforms would be less refined than the publications of online news and journalism sites, which would change the implications of the study, and perhaps show how the more “common” players talk about the issue.

The issue of loot boxes will most likely prevail as a hot topic in gaming communities for as long as game publishers choose to include them in their games. In fact, the current trends suggest that the industry has moved on from loot boxes to the monetization model of Games as a service (GaaS) (Stefanidis 2020). This monetization model relies heavily on microtransactions, especially a specific type known as a “season pass”, which encourages players to engage with the game more often (Stefanidis 2020). Perhaps the controversies surrounding loot boxes has influenced the industry to find a better way to keep making money from published video games. Or perhaps the threat of legislation classifying loot boxes as gambling was enough to make publishers give up on the lucrative loot box system. Whatever the reasoning behind the shift in monetization trends is, it is quite unlikely that many people would miss the days when loot boxes were present in almost every major game. In addition, as season passes have already claimed many controversies for their own, it is quite likely that publishers will continue evolving their monetization methods, moving on to find newer, more lucrative ways of making money from video games.

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