

Videogames as Social Genre:

The Design Ethos, Player Agency, and Failures of *Diablo Immortal*

By

Katlin Kolby

A Thesis Submitted in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for the Degree of Master
of Arts in English

Middle Tennessee State University

December 2023

Thesis Committee:

Eric Detweiler, Chair

Poushali Bhadury

ABSTRACT

In this thesis, I use the *Diablo* franchise of videogames, through which the genre of action roleplaying games is birthed, to exemplify the argument that the theory of a socially constructed genre from rhetorical studies, rather than a taxonomic concept of genre as it is usually used in games studies, could greatly benefit game studies' discussions moving forward. It is crucial to acknowledge that *Diablo Immortal* critically fails to live up to the genre established by the previous three iterations in the franchise and chose to design a game around conventions that directly contradict one another, resulting in a terrible player experience. This game does not fit the design ethos of the studio, nor does it exhibit the franchise brand identity as defined by previous titles. I argue that conversations surrounding the shortcomings of this game would necessarily be lackluster should they exclude considerations of socially defined genre conventions.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

Introduction.....	1
A Note on Terminology.....	11
Chapter I: The Legacy.....	16
Diablo I.....	22
Diablo II.....	32
Conclusion.....	43
Chapter II: The Blunders.....	45
Diablo III.....	48
Lawsuits and NetEase.....	60
BlizzCon 2018.....	72
Conclusion.....	76
Chapter III: The Game.....	80
Diablo Immortal.....	84
Genre and Agency.....	102
Conclusion.....	107
Epilogue.....	110
Bibliography.....	114
Games Referenced.....	119

INTRODUCTION

The heat of a Tennessee summer can be best described as a moist, slightly overbearing hug—even in the evenings. June 2022 was an exciting time for me, as I had been looking forward to the release of a new mobile game from the company Activision Blizzard. I waited for it to download while sitting on my porch on this pleasantly smothering summer night. Staring at the progress bar on my phone, I thought of all the reasons given from fans of the *Diablo* franchise to be wary of this game: mobile games are not as real as games for personal computers or consoles, mobile games often have nefarious gambling-like shop mechanics, *Diablo* was not meant to be played on a phone, and on and on. I worried for the fanbase that was so quick to dismiss what I thought was a great leap forward for the series—one that promised to bring one of the best titles to a more casual and widespread platform.

As the game finally booted up, I watched the opening cinematics eagerly, hoping that this new title, *Diablo Immortal*, would provide a lovely reprieve before I started graduate school again in the fall. The storyline, though meant to be set between *Diablo II* and *III*, seemed promising as most of the previous games follow a similar pattern; Diablo—or the game’s version of the devil—is coming, Hell is opening, and you, brave adventurer, are the world’s last hope. For the first few weeks of play, around the time it took to reach the maximum level of 60 if played for a few hours daily, the game was generally an enjoyable, relaxing experience. However, I often found myself questioning the currencies and shop as I leveled. I knew that the major quests, or tasks to be completed to receive equipment and experience to level up my character, would provide

most of what I needed until the true “grind” began. This grind is often described by players as the point where actual gameplay begins—the monotonous repetition of content to get high-level equipment and make your character even more powerful.

While entering this stage, I had played consistently and for enough hours to keep up with the server average Paragon level (or levels that can be achieved after reaching the “maximum,” wherein you continue to build your character’s skills and complete more difficult content). Once I decided to take a break for around a week, my initial concerns about the game slowly began to turn into a white-hot fury. The game is designed to benefit those that play constantly and spend money in the shop. After being gone for a mere seven days, most players had surpassed me. I could no longer find groups of people that were at the same level as me to play with. I could no longer keep up. It was next to impossible for me to do many of my daily tasks without either begging people to let me tag along as a useless extra or doing very few possible things as a single player.

Diablo has always had a single player function. In fact, until *Immortal*, multiplayer play has been an additional possibility—not a necessity. With this mobile game, the focus seems to be on forcing players into groups. There are levels of difficulty to the game that, once entered, increase the gear that drops. Without increasing the difficulty, the stuff that I would get from my solo play would not upgrade anything on my character. After reaching a certain difficulty in the game, running a dungeon or instance by yourself no longer yields gear. You must run these with a group. While I would normally be happy to participate in a multiplayer experience, I was not playing *Immortal* for this purpose, nor would anyone expect that to be the requirement from this genre of game. Further, because I was now “behind,” the automatic group finder, which places

players into queues for groups without the need to ask each other to play, had ridiculously long wait times: often over an hour for one dungeon. This was quickly becoming a problem.

The only way to remedy this was to “catch up,” but that required me to be able to do exactly the things that I needed to “catch up” to do. This pushed me to seek out whatever solo content that was available to level up my gear, and what was available required money. *Diablo Immortal* has a system of “rifts” that provide the loot that I needed. The Challenge Rifts are timed and require a character to be as top-notch as they can be. The Elder Rifts, however, are where you can loot special items that are like upgrades for your gear and provide unique abilities and boosts to your character. These are the crux of spending for the game, and the only way to receive them is to run the Elder Rifts. To gain a higher chance of looting one, you must either wait every week for a free item that increases your chance of looting the special items or buy them from the shop. Obviously, most people choose to buy the upgrades. What further complicates matters is the ranking system on said special items—they range from a single star to five stars, and they are not easy to come by.

It becomes clear that the game has created a rather perfect way to rope players into either spending money or continuously falling “behind” their server’s level, and the game does not treat those behind very kindly. So, I started to wonder why would a game that was meant to be casual and inclusive be so cutthroat and require so much play time. I was angry at the game for duping so many people out of thousands of dollars, getting caught in several scandals almost immediately, and generally disappointing the *Diablo* fanbase with a lackluster installment in the series. While I originally wanted to write this

thesis about how exploitative the game is, I realized that my actual concern is figuring out exactly why, theoretically, the game was not enjoyable, why it felt like it didn't belong in the franchise, and why it seemed to greatly limit player agency. While the game's qualitative status as nefarious or exploitative is hard to argue against, I had to ask how did such a beloved powerhouse like Activision Blizzard become a company that makes these choices? And, importantly, why did I feel so uncomfortable playing the game?

The problem in question stems from the shift in genres for this title of the franchise. Carolyn Miller, in her chapter "Genre in Ancient and Networked Media" in the book *Ancient Rhetorics & Digital Networks*, states that "the traditional, stabilizing concept of genre is being applied to a media landscape that seems constantly in motion, and that this constant motion is understood to be producing new genres."¹ For this franchise, the first *Diablo* had originally created its own new genre called the action roleplaying game (ARPG), which I will touch on further in chapter one. In the case of *Diablo Immortal*, the designers and company chose to not only shift from an ARPG to a massively multiplayer online action roleplaying game (MMOARPG) but also to release it on a mobile platform. Mobile games and MMO's have their own genre conventions that do not quite mesh with the original genre conventions of the ARPG as it was defined by the first *Diablo* game. This also brings into question what Bettina Bódi calls "game design lineages" or "design ethos" that are "traceable lines of inspiration and evolution in game design practice over time, as enabled by technological progress and player practices."² Bódi argues that we can "reconstruct the design ethos of a game studio by

¹ Carolyn Miller, "Genre in Ancient and Networked Media," ed. Michelle Kennerly and Damien Smith Pfister, *Ancient Rhetorics & Digital Networks* (University of Alabama Press, 2018), 176.

² Bettina Bódi, *Videogames and Agency*, 2022, <https://doi.org/10.4324/9781003298786>, 3.

looking at how they communicate their professional and artistic identity, what the aesthetics are of the games they produce over time, and how these are reported on in trade press and in journalistic outlets.”³

Bódi uses what are called “paratexts” or “materials generated around the actual videogames themselves” as supporting research to explore her player agency heuristic, which I will use to explore the player agency in the *Diablo* franchise throughout my chapters in detail.⁴ She does so because “the videogame industry is notoriously secretive, and so turning to sources like game reviews is a productive way around the invisible wall.”⁵ My research began with the company’s own news releases and blog sites, as I would print every new post as it cropped up. These resources revealed the rhetoric that Blizzard was using for its own title, allowing me to then contrast it with paratexts like those used by Bódi—reviews and news articles from outside the company—to see how inside and outside perspectives differed. I ravenously read through as many articles about how the game was being denounced on its own reddit forums, boycotted by Twitch streamers, and generally bashed across the internet. This brought me to question the company and how it was functioning during development.

I found that the company had suffered extensive and high turnover rates, been embroiled in a few lawsuits, and was not in the best shape throughout the course of the development of the game. They had even signed off half of the enterprise of developing the game to an outside party (an unheard-of act for Blizzard). The outside party, NetEase, was mostly famous for advertising and mobile gaming in China. The plot was thickening.

³ Ibid.

⁴ Ibid.

⁵ Ibid.

In addition to the design ethos as it relates to the games themselves, I want to look at the ethos of the company as it relates to the public perception of Activision Blizzard as a place of business. These lawsuits are key to understanding how the company began to lose some of the interest, support, and trust of their rabid fanbase directly before the release of *Diablo Immortal*. This discussion also explores the important “professional identity” half of the studio’s design ethos—one which seems to be a singular whole for all of Activision Blizzard. Further, it is important to note the social expectations put upon both the company and the genre as defined by the franchise. As Miller explores in her discussion of how forsaking genre conventions can cause public outrage, issues like the ones brought up through these lawsuits “stirred public reflection on authenticity, credibility, truth, and trust—all issues related to genre expectations.”⁶ This behind-the-scenes look at company lawsuits surrounding Activision Blizzard similarly dives into the issues that relate to social expectations both for the studio and the games developed by it.

The switch to a mobile game and to an MMOARPG for *Diablo Immortal*’s development seems to cause the same kind of scandal in the franchise that Miller explores when she mentions famous cases of memoirs being revealed as fabrications. She states that “genre scandals like these are useful because...it is when social norms are violated that we become newly aware of their existence.”⁷ The social expectations for both Activision Blizzard and the game *Diablo Immortal* were violated by the actions of the company and the design of the end product. The design ethos bears a direct connection to the genre conventions and expectations for the games themselves. This is a

⁶ Miller, “Genre in Ancient and Networked Media,” 178.

⁷ Ibid., 178-9.

connection that Bódi is missing in her discussion of game design lineages or design ethos, as she actively dismisses discussions of genre in this context. She states that “by framing the case study games and the studios that produced them as exemplifying game design lineages, rather than describing them in terms of genre, which tends to lack connotative consistency, I can observe not only *how* the games as artifacts afford and limit agency, but also *why* that may be.”⁸ While she is correct that genre tends to lack connotative consistency when defined in terms of hard taxonomy, consistency of a genre can be explored when defined in terms of social expectations—something that can be observed directly through the very paratexts of reviews and news articles that Bódi uses in her book. I argue that, especially in the case of a franchise that defined its own genre, the game design lineage of such a franchise and studio is necessarily connected to the conventions of that genre. Agency, for *Diablo*, is also intimately connected to affordances of the ARPG genre.

To begin, I want to examine the franchise’s history and how each game builds upon the last to create the fanbase and player expectations that awaited the release of *Diablo Immortal*. Background information about the company and the development of the previous games will proceed from here. How has the history of the company Activision Blizzard shaped the development of this game? How has the franchise changed over time and what has the user rating looked like between each iteration of *Diablo*? What effect does employee turnover have on development and the morale of the development team? For chapter one, I will be examining the development of the first two

⁸ Bódi, *Videogames and Agency*, 3.

games of the franchise to understand how the ARPG genre was created, how the fanbase was formed, and how the artistic design ethos for the teams behind the franchise was developed. I will also consider player agency of each game by applying Bódi's heuristic and looking to how agency is related to genre conventions for an ARPG as established by the first *Diablo* game.

I will then, in chapter two, begin by looking at *Diablo III* and how it started the slow progression away from these conventions before ultimately redesigning the game to reflect them again. This will demonstrate how the franchise made design choices that went against both the design ethos and the social expectations for the genre which had to be remedied to maintain the fanbase and regain their trust and support. I will then examine some of the lawsuits surrounding the company's cases of sexual harassment and inequality leading up to the release of *Diablo Immortal* as they relate to the ethos of Activision Blizzard in the eyes of the public. This will mark a major impact on public distrust which directly relates to how the company is perceived for the release of *Diablo Immortal*. I will also examine the lawsuits surrounding the other popular mobile game from the studio, *Hearthstone*, as these relate to the public expectations for another mobile game from the same publisher or the design ethos as it relates to the mobile game genre. It is also pertinent to briefly discuss the other developing company brought in for *Diablo Immortal*, NetEase. I will investigate Activision Blizzard's choice of NetEase as the primary development company for *Diablo Immortal* and this choice's probable effect on the expectations for the game. Concluding chapter two, I will look to the public reaction to the announcement of *Diablo Immortal* at BlizzCon in 2018, wherein one can watch

public opinion play out in real time when the crowds verbally show their dissent for the choice of another mobile game.

After its announcement and release, it is important to look at the game itself—with a heavy focus on the shop—to determine just how justified players' fears were. What is available for players to engage in and for how long before they hit a paywall or time gate?⁹ In what ways does *Diablo Immortal* utilize microtransactions and pay-to-win mechanics to exploit their player base? These paywalls, time gates, microtransactions, and pay-to-win mechanics are conventions to the mobile game genre, and they directly restrict player agency. Further, the choice to make this game an MMO requires an extensive amount of multiplayer play, which also restricts player agency in its own ways, as the conventions of both an MMO and an ARPG seem to contradict one another in this game's design. In my final chapter, I will be performing a textual analysis case study on *Diablo Immortal* to look at how its choice of genres, the mobile game and the MMOARPG, directly affect player agency through Bódi's heuristic. I will also be looking at how the game deviates from the design ethos firmly established by the first three games in the franchise and how this, too, relates to the genre conventions established by the first game in the series. I will demonstrate that Bódi's choice to exclude genre from her discussion of design ethos limits the scope of her study, and that the addition of genre would expand the applicability of her concept of design ethos to more titles and aspects of analysis. This franchise, specifically, shows that some choices

⁹ Paywalls refer to a stop in play unless the player can pay money, while time-gates refer to in-game timers that won't allow players to continue playing until they run out.

of design as it relates to genre could very well be directly tied to the game design lineage of a franchise or studio.

Importantly, we must dispel the idea that I can talk of any online game in a wholesale way that will cover them in perpetuity. As Henry Lowood states in an interview with David Heineman, “game texts are not fixed texts in the way that we’re familiar with written text...it is a necessity to understand games as a medium, as artifacts that are always under construction.”¹⁰ He goes on to describe patches and fixes that come along with game development over-time—especially with online games. Given that I am working with the *Diablo* franchise, Blizzard’s recent title in the franchise before the release of *Diablo Immortal*, *Diablo III*, was unpopular and filled with “bugs,” or broken parts of the game, for quite some time after its debut. *Diablo III* was consistently worked on to the point that it became far more palatable for its players, which was a stark difference from where it started. It is entirely possible that by the time that I release my project, *Diablo Immortal* will address some of the issues raised herein. For this, I ask my audience to suspend any ideas that I speak of the game in totality or perpetuity. I am aiming to address the game as it was released and developed within the first year of its existence. More than this is beyond my capabilities to keep up with.

As Lowood continues in the interview, he speaks of a “hierarchy of questions” that one must try to address when considering games that have changed over time.¹¹ Specifically discussing *Diablo III*, Lowood posits a few important questions that are relevant to my own work here: “How did Blizzard patch *Diablo 3* at a certain time?”

¹⁰ David S. Heineman and Henry Lowood, *Thinking about Video Games: Interviews with the Experts* (Indiana University Press, 2015), 77.

¹¹ Heineman and Lowood, *Thinking about Video Games: Interviews with the Experts*, 77.

‘How was this version of *Diablo 3* created?’ ...’How does Blizzard, a content-creation company, respond to the consumers of its products, the players, in developing patches for its game?’”¹² These are more in line with the questions that I wish to home in on, specifically the focus on response to players and choosing a particular version of the game to discuss and examine. The purpose of this project, ultimately, is to explore the questions surrounding the game and the platform to help us figure out how this game allows for player agency and fits in to the ARPG genre as it was established by the franchise.

A Note on Terminology

Before we dive into the content of the rest of this project, it is pertinent to define the common terms that will crop up throughout, beginning with ‘video game,’ also to be referred to simply as ‘game’ throughout. While there have been scores of books and articles written on what defines or legitimizes a game, it is far beyond my own work to spend time with the parameters of the term beyond a simple definition. Importantly, this project will try not to delve too deeply into the complexities of interactivity and how that qualifies a game as such. For my purposes, I will merely rely on Merriam-Webster: a video game is “an electronic game in which players control images on a video screen.”¹³ Also of note is that this simple definition includes mobile platforms, whereas many other definitions focus solely on console or computer video games.

¹² *Ibid.*, 77-8.

¹³ “Video Game,” in *The Merriam-Webster.Com Dictionary*, February 12, 2023, <https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/video%20game>.

For mobile games particularly, there is a type of paid content that many players are wary of, if not entirely furious with; this is commonly known as a microtransaction. Broadly speaking, microtransactions refer to “obtaining in-game items for real money.”¹⁴ Controversies involving these items primarily are concerned with whether said items benefit the player in-game or are purely cosmetic in nature. Cosmetic, in this case, refers to any item that serves no in-game function aside from appearances. These can also include non-essential items like pets that may have in-game functions but are tertiary to the vast majority of primary gameplay so much so that they can still be considered cosmetic. Essentially, if people are paying to better their in-game character’s actual play, most people take issue with the paid content involved. Often, microtransactions of this kind are linked to another concept: pay-to-win or “freemium” games.

The term pay-to-win is relatively self-explanatory, as these are games wherein players usually must pay real-world money to either keep up with other players or excel in the game at a reasonable rate. These games privilege the players that spend more—sometimes even so far as implementing time-gates, or necessary waiting periods, for gameplay for those who do not pay. These games are often shamed in gaming communities for this kind of nefarious payment expectation. “Freemium” games are pay-to-win but often include membership-like purchasable content that greatly benefits the player over those without it. These are usually “battle passes” or something akin to a monthly subscription. While many games have had a monthly subscription, see most

¹⁴ Erica L. Neely, “Come for the Game, Stay for the Cash Grab: The Ethics of Loot Boxes, Microtransactions, and Freemium Games,” *Games and Culture* 16, no. 2 (February 28, 2021): 228, <https://doi.org/10.1177/1555412019887658>.

massive-multiplayer-online-roleplaying-games,¹⁵ required to play them, the concept of a “freemium” game includes the important distinction that they are marketed as free-to-play. When in the reality of these games, free play is hardly worthwhile compared to paid play. Thus, the name “freemium” playing on both “free” and “premium” paid content. The dichotomy between the haves and have-nots in these cases tends to create rifts between players that do and do not pay.

One of my concerns in this project is making the distinction between an inclusive and exclusive environment in a video game. *Diablo Immortal* has a very exclusionary environment for those that wish to play for free as well as those who prefer solo play. The game involves many kinds of multiplayer content—so much so that most of the progression requires other players. These take the forms of groups, or small parties of players, and warbands, a dedicated group with the formality of consistent play together and a chosen name for the group, as well as clans, or guild-like structures of many players with leadership roles, recruitment, and game-wide advancement opportunities. There are also raids wherein larger groups of players defeat very difficult bosses together. Almost all free playable content in the game has an option for, while much of it requires, multiplayer play. For someone like me who enjoys, and has always enjoyed within the *Diablo* franchise, playing on my own, also known as “solo-ing,” *Diablo Immortal*’s seeming obsession with multiplayer content is certainly a difficult transition to make.

In the case of this project, the term “server” refers to the group of players that interact on any given game server. A game server “is a computer that acts as a central

¹⁵ Games such as *World of Warcraft*, *EverQuest*, and the like have required players to pay a monthly subscription in addition to purchasing the game itself and any subsequent expansions of content.

authority to define the current state of a multiplayer game. Players send the server updates about what they're doing in-game...The server translates those inputs and returns the information back to the players.”¹⁶ Essentially, these are giant computers that update the game for everyone playing and keep a solid or “official” game world running for anyone that connects to the game via their own device. For very large games like *Diablo Immortal*, there is a need for many servers to keep up with both their high volume of players as well as the cultural and lingual diversity of their global populations. So, when I refer to a “server,” I am referring often to the population of the server or the group of players that connect to any given server and sometimes to the technical hardware involved that exists in a data center somewhere. Context should easily clarify which usage is at hand.

Within the game worlds kept by these servers, there are several maps and areas to explore. One of these that I will refer to often is called a dungeon, which is a digital space with monsters and, often, bosses (or more difficult fights for players that require higher skill and complex activity to defeat) that all yield loot (or items) for characters in-game. The *Diablo* franchise is commonly known for its use of “(random) level generators as space generators for new game levels...level generators create more or less random game spaces.”¹⁷ This means that some of the spaces themselves, or map layouts of the dungeons, are randomized or procedurally generated. Because of the focus on and consistent use of dungeons in *Diablo Immortal*, as well as all the games in the *Diablo* franchise, it is often referred to as a “dungeon-crawler.” This term harkens all the way

¹⁶ Gallagher, Austin, “What Is a Game Server? Everything You Need to Know,” OneQode, July 18, 2022, <https://www.oneqode.com/what-is-a-game-server>.

¹⁷ Michael Nitsche, *Video Game Spaces: Image, Play, and Structure in 3D Worlds* (MIT Press, 2008), 167.

back to the game *Dungeons and Dragons* and refers to games that create a computerized version of this fantasy-like experience of exploring dungeons.¹⁸

¹⁸ Nathan Brewer, "Going Rogue: A Brief History of the Computerized Dungeon Crawl," InSight, July 7, 2016, <https://insight.ieeeusa.org/articles/going-rogue-a-brief-history-of-the-computerized-dungeon-crawl/>.

CHAPTER I: THE LEGACY

I can still remember the smell of my parents' basement from when I was in middle and high school. The warm plastics of our computers mingled with the stale stench of cigarettes and body odor all hanging over the musty, damp smell of an underground lair. At the time unfinished with walls of insulation behind their thin, brown paper covering, the bone-like wooden beams bare to the world, that large room contained the family computers—including, on occasion, those of the friends that would come to this safe-haven to play their games in peace as my parents were rather supportive of the habit. My father introduced me to video games at a very young age, and the most impactful was *EverQuest* in 1999. The open world of this game had an immediately immersive and grasping effect on me, pulling me deep into its recesses and showing me just how beautiful and intricate a game's space can become. I had an entire life online—one that felt more real to me—running parallel to the one outside. My characters were extensions of myself, as many gamers would likely admit as well, and the difficulties within my chosen games were personal and intimate in ways that I still remember with fond nostalgia.

Dungeon crawling, starting with dungeons in *EverQuest* and evolving to include the beloved dungeons from games like *Diablo*, became a dear pastime for me—running through dark corridors with my character, afraid of what lies beyond the next turn. In my later experiences with the *Diablo* series, the beasts of the area would morph with each new iteration of the map, sometimes with the power of lightning on their side, other times

with the ability to spawn walls that would trap me in their clutches. As the difficulty of the dungeons grew, so too would these monsters. Much further into the game, they would possess multiple abilities, perhaps one that would spawn area of effect damage on the ground—these death traps were to be avoided at all costs. The bosses of these dungeons were particularly challenging, requiring constant movement and quick reactions, sometimes dropping the gear that would upgrade my character and prepare them further for the next, even more difficult encounter. The gold goblins were always a fan favorite, spawning at random and running quickly away, leaving a trail of gold and gear in their wake. I usually played a spell casting character—sorcerers, wizards, and necromancers were my favorite classes. Armed with magical abilities and high-level equipment, often followed by my very own undead horde, I would explore these labyrinthine spaces in my parents' basement well into the early hours of morning. These are defining moments for the birth of the action roleplaying game genre and the moment in time within which it was born.

This era of gameplay, often with friends lugging their PCs along to all play together in those dank, musty basements, is highly nostalgic yet characteristically different from the multiplayer games of today. The visceral quality of playing in a group in the early hours of the morning, body odors and snacks mingling among us, almost feel like genre conventions themselves—things that define the games and gameplay of that time. These were experiences from the *Diablo* games, and each previous title holds its own cache of my memories to recall with appreciation and respect. I cannot say the same for *Diablo Immortal*, and for this reason, I must question how the franchise got to such a place that many diehard, loyal fans no longer enjoy a *Diablo* game. To begin, a general

discussion of the previous games' development, gameplay, and reception seems necessary. With the first two titles in the *Diablo* franchise, Blizzard established a legacy that created a new genre of videogame, a loyal and vast fanbase, and a design ethos for the series that defined expectations for said fans. In this chapter, I will examine *Diablo* and *Diablo II* to trace these novel contributions to the world of videogames and uncover the origins of the franchise's success. By doing so, I provide a basis from which *Diablo Immortal* strays and help explain the intensity of the backlash and fans' reaction to the game. To do so, it is pertinent to recount the history of the company and development of *Diablo* and *Diablo II* to shed light on the processes by which the games came to be. Through such a study, I trace how the genre, design ethos, and fanbase were formed. I will also look at reviews to examine what made the games so successful for their targeted audience at the time of release and currently.

I will be relying on Carolyn Miller's discussions of genre throughout her works to both define genre as well as illuminate the way in which digital genres come into being. This process of genre creation is also necessarily connected to the establishment of a fanbase, as Carolyn Miller has famously tied genre to social action and collective needs and expectations.¹ For my discussions of design ethos, I will rely heavily upon the work of Bettina Bódi in her book *Video Games and Agency* for both a definition and examples of how the term applies to a videogame production studio. The ethos of both company and franchise will shift over time, and the exploration of how the public is first introduced to and was able to formulate said ethos is paramount to my study. Her focus

¹ See Carolyn Miller's oeuvre, including almost forty years of work in genre studies, namely her original article "Genre as Social Action" from 1984: Carolyn Miller, "Genre as Social Action," *Quarterly Journal of Speech* 70, no. 2 (May 1, 1984): 151–67, <https://doi.org/10.1080/00335638409383686>.

on agency will also highlight some of the reasoning behind the success of the earlier iterations in the *Diablo* franchise alongside the failures of the company in later chapters.

According to Miller, “a rhetorically sound definition of genre must be centered not on the substance or the form of discourse but on the action it is used to accomplish.”² She looks to the “connection between genre and recurrent situation and the way in which genre can be said to represent typified rhetorical action” to establish this definition.³ Miller further defines genre by connecting it to social action: “it becomes pragmatic, fully rhetorical, a point of connection between intention and effect, an aspect of social action.”⁴ The social action to be discussed in this project revolves entirely upon how design choices made by the studio, the intentions, directly impact what a player is able to do in the game, the effects. In the case of videogames, which are far more interactive than most forms of written discourse, the genre is defined by the social expectations, or conventions and “norms,” applied to not only the common elements and design choices for a game as an observable text but also the affordances and limitations of gameplay itself—an aspect of player agency. For the combination of rhetorical impact and genre within the realm of videogames, one can look either to the ludic, or design and mechanical, elements of a game or the narrative, or story and plot, elements of a game to see what social actions are being performed in which context. For the sake of *Diablo*, and like much of Bódi’s work, I am far more concerned with the ludic rather than narrative elements of the franchise.

Bódi looks to the ludic when considering design ethos, as she focuses on the design of the games that a studio creates. For Bódi, design ethos can be reconstructed “by

² Miller, “Genre as Social Action,” 151.

³ Ibid.

⁴ Ibid., 153.

looking at how they [the studios] communicate their professional and artistic identity.”⁵

What of studios that are colossal and have multiple teams working on many different aesthetics in the “games they produce over time?”⁶ For Activision Blizzard, I will be focusing specifically on the *Diablo* franchise’s teams’ game design lineage rather than that of the studio as a whole. This is because Blizzard, both at the time of the first game and of *Diablo Immortal*, has been too multifaceted and large as a company, working on multiple titles at once and eventually hosting its own convention for fans, to attribute a complete design ethos to in terms of one of its many franchises. Importantly, the artistic identity of studios as massive as Blizzard is not one of a cohesive, singular identity across all titles. The artistic identity varies wildly between franchises, whereas there seems to be a singular artistic identity for the studios that Bódi examines throughout her book.

However, the professional identity of Blizzard in the eyes of the public seems to be a singular one. This is why I will speak of the studio in terms of the *Diablo* team for discussions of the games and in terms of the studio in totality for my discussions of public opinion in chapter two.

Further, I would argue that the artistic identity of a studio that defines a new genre is intricately tied to that genre’s conventions as they are defined by the studio’s design of the game—the very heart of artistic identity as it relates to game development. This is especially true for Blizzard, a company that has been known for defining genres or at least producing touchstone titles for genres. The concept of genre is one of the only ubiquitous things baked into the artistic design ethos or game design lineage of the whole

⁵ Bódi, *Videogames and Agency*, 3.

⁶ *Ibid.*

studio, as they have consistently communicated an artistic identity as a company that produces these genre-defining titles—both for new genres like the ARPG and for already existing genres like real-time strategy (RTS) games in the case of *StarCraft* or massively multiplayer online roleplaying games (MMORPG) in the case of *World of Warcraft*. In this chapter, for Blizzard as a studio and *Diablo* as a franchise, I will be looking at the first two games and the studio’s history surrounding the games’ development in isolation of the team responsible to define design ethos.

I will also be defining player agency for the two games—looking to conventions of the ARPG genre as established by *Diablo* and *Diablo II* for their gameplay affordances and limitations. For a theoretical framework of ways to define and explore player agency, Bettina Bódi’s heuristic as outlined in her book *Videogames and Agency* will be used. Agency has a long history of debate in video game studies and has been academically handled by many scholars over the years. Instead of a philosophical discussion, I will focus primarily upon agency as it exists for the player in the games that I will be analyzing. I chose Bódi out of all others for her multidimensional approach to agency—one which explores agency from many angles and, thus, defines analysis of it through an eclectic lens that makes application to my own choice of subject simplistic under one theorist rather than divisive between many.⁷ Bódi argues that “at its conceptual core,

⁷ For agency in videogames in terms of diversity, representation, and community participation, see the likes of John E. Banks, *Co-Creating Videogames*, 2013, <https://doi.org/10.5040/9781472544353>; Kishonna L. Gray and David J. Leonard, *Woke Gaming: Digital Challenges to Oppression and Social Injustice* (University of Washington Press, 2018); Daniel Joseph, “The Discourse of Digital Dispossession: Paid Modifications and Community Crisis on Steam,” *Games and Culture* 13, no. 7 (February 27, 2018): 690–707, <https://doi.org/10.1177/1555412018756488>; Bonnie Ruberg and Adrienne Shaw, *Queer Game Studies*, 2017. For approaches that focus on the player’s ability to change the story, see the likes of Sebastian Domsch, *Storyplaying: Agency and Narrative in Video Games*, 2013; Sarah Stang, “‘This Action Will Have Consequences’: Interactivity and Player Agency,” *Game Studies* 19, no. 1 (May 2019), <https://gamestudies.org/1901/articles/stang>. See also the works of Karen Tanenbaum, Theresa

agency can be afforded in space; in time; in terms of how much the avatar and the gameworld can be tailored to players' preference; and in the development of a story.”⁸

For the purpose of this project, I will not focus too heavily upon the final aspect through which agency can be afforded, as it has not been central to the purpose of the ARPG genre or, more importantly, the franchise itself. While there is a narrative, it does not usually take a high place of priority during the development of most of the games. However, space, time, and customizability of the avatar are all highly important to the franchise and the genre.

Diablo I

David Brevik, who had taught himself to program from a very young age, is the original concept creator for *Diablo*, which he came up with in high school. The game itself is named after Mt. Diablo in San Francisco, Brevik's hometown.⁹ He met Erich and Max Schaefer while working for a clipart company which had recently decided that it wanted to branch out into video games and had hired David as a programmer—Erich and Max were artists.¹⁰ The company did not last long, and once David had graduated in

Tanenbaum, Jesper Juul, Chris Crawford, Ernest Adams, Maria-Laure Ryan, Henry Jenkins, and Janet Murray for other definitions of agency and interactivity as it exists in the scholarly conversation surrounding video games. This is by no means an exhaustive list and should be considered a smattering of examples rather than a comprehensive overview.

⁸ Bódi, *Videogames and Agency*, 43.

⁹ See K. Thor Jensen, “25 Years Ago, Diablo Invented the Loot Game,” PCMAG, January 11, 2022, <https://www.pcmag.com/news/25-years-ago-diablo-invented-the-loot-game>; Alex Wawro, “20 Years Later, David Brevik Shares the Story of Making Diablo,” Game Developer, March 18, 2016, <https://www.gamedeveloper.com/design/20-years-later-david-brevik-shares-the-story-of-making-i-diablo-i->; David L. Craddock, *Stay Awhile and Listen: Book I: How Two Blizzards Unleashed Diablo and Forged a Video-Game Empire* (Digital Monument Press, LLC, 2013).; and David Brevik, “Classic Game Postmortem: Diablo,” Game Developers Conference, March, 2016, <https://gdcvault.com/play/1023469/Classic-Game-Postmortem> for *Diablo*'s development and history.

¹⁰ Brevik, “Classic Game Postmortem: Diablo.”

1993, he founded Condor Games with the Schaefer brothers.¹¹ In 1994, David Brevik had copyrighted his eight page pitch document, which describes *Diablo* as “a role playing game wherein a player creates a single character and guides him through a dungeon in an attempt to find and destroy ‘Diablo,’ the devil himself.”¹²

Originally conceptualized to be turn-based,¹³ single player, on DOS (or disc operating system),¹⁴ and with expansion packs that contain items,¹⁵ this pitch document circulated for years, but no one was interested as many assumed PC-role playing games were not a good investment at the time. Previously, Condor Games and Silicon & Synapse, another development company, had been hired to work on separate *Justice League Task Force* games destined for the Sega Genesis and Super Nintendo. Both companies had been hired by Sunsoft to create a game for each console, Condor for the Genesis and Silicon & Synapse for the Nintendo—neither company knew of the other one.¹⁶ It wasn’t until they were both at a CES (Consumer Electronics Show—one of the oldest conferences for tech) that David noticed another game with the same title set up right next to theirs.¹⁷ The games, oddly enough, were very similar and this started the friendships that eventually became a partnership later on. Silicon & Synapse had planned

¹¹ Ibid.

¹² Condor Games, “Diablo: Game Concept by Condor, Inc.,” 1994, https://www.graybeardgames.com/download/diablo_pitch.pdf.

¹³ This playstyle entails that combat takes place by way of turns. However, the original Diablo turn-based combat would not be like most others wherein monsters and players took turns back and forth. Brevik had envisioned his players with turn points and each action would take a certain amount of them—thereby each “turn” could have a host of actions from the player. It was a complicated system, and Brevik has since admitted that real-time was the way to go.

¹⁴ For more information on DOS systems, see the encyclopedia article: <https://www.britannica.com/technology/MS-DOS>.

¹⁵ Brevik saw this system as similar to *Magic: The Gathering* playing card packs, wherein players could buy an expansion pack and get a hoard of items for their characters.

¹⁶ Brevik, “Classic Game Postmortem: Diablo.”

¹⁷ Ibid.

on making PC games, and this excited Brevik. Later, they renamed themselves Blizzard and released *Warcraft* in 1994.¹⁸ Once Blizzard had completed *Warcraft*, one of the very first RTS (real time strategy) games to be released, they had promised to look at Condor's game idea.¹⁹ In 1995, Blizzard comes out to San Francisco to hear the *Diablo* pitch and sign a contract with Condor to make the game.²⁰

With a crew of fourteen, *Diablo*, now decidedly a real-time game,²¹ was underway.²² Condor Games did struggle to pay the bills and payroll of their team during development, and Brevik found himself in the middle of a bidding war for his company between Blizzard and 3DO, a company that the crew had been doing contract work for to help pay their salaries.²³ Condor Games, in Brevik's words, "felt that Blizzard really got us, and got the game. And we were so close in company culture and beliefs that we turned down twice as much money to get bought by—and become—Blizzard."²⁴ The tightly knit crew also created its own family of sorts, playing games together in the few breaks that they had and providing the relatable crunch-time stories of everyone working nonstop to make their dream a reality. This close-knit crew represents part of the design lineage for the studio; being able to work on a game with such a small group produces a very particular kind of attention to detail and cooperation that tended to, especially back in the '90s when graphics weren't as complex, yield a cohesive, focused product. The

¹⁸ Jensen, "25 Years Ago, Diablo Invented the Loot Game."

¹⁹ David Brevik, "David Brevik: 'A Devil Makes History - Classic Post Mortem on Diablo 2' | Devcom Digital" devcom - Developer Community, September 10, 2020, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=cuNgTnfk-wU>.

²⁰ Brevik, "Classic Game Postmortem: Diablo."

²¹ This means that the gameplay happens as you input your controls rather than a turn-based system.

²² Jensen, "25 Years Ago, Diablo Invented the Loot Game."

²³ Brevik, "Classic Game Postmortem: Diablo."

²⁴ Wawro, "20 Years Later, David Brevik Shares the Story of Making *Diablo*."

original hope was to release the game by Christmas of 1996, but with Brevik's wife pregnant and due at the same time, the end was, according to Brevik, "really, really rough."²⁵ The game shipped on December 31st, 1996 but was not available across the country until January of 1997, with the expansion released later that same year.²⁶ Brevik's wife gave birth to their daughter on January 3rd, days after the original release of the game.²⁷

In a talk at GDC (Game Developers Conference) in 2016, Brevik discusses the top four things that went right and the top four things that went wrong, starting with the lighting of the game. Their design for how to light each square, with a range of 256 colors (which was a huge deal at the time), was revolutionary in that each square's lighting combined the levels of the dungeon with the lighting of whatever was occupying the square to merge into a much more realistic, shadowy, and ominous atmosphere.²⁸ This accounts for the original gothic, dark aesthetic of the game and defines the future aesthetics for games in the franchise—part of the design ethos of the development team. Another thing to go right was their choice to change the game to real time. This decision was one that took Brevik a long time to come around to, likely due to its novelty in the RPG genre, but once he changed the game over (which took him a single day) and killed his first skeleton in real-time, he knew that this was going to be a huge success.²⁹

The inclusion of real-time gameplay marked the advent of the ARPG and the creation of the genre. The "action" in the acronym refers directly to the action of real-

²⁵ Ibid.

²⁶ "Diablo I - Diablo Wiki," Diablo Wiki, n.d., https://diablo-archive.fandom.com/wiki/Diablo_I.

²⁷ Wawro, "20 Years Later, David Brevik Shares the Story of Making *Diablo*."

²⁸ Brevik, "Classic Game Postmortem: Diablo."

²⁹ Ibid.

time combat, and this design choice sets one of the major design and gameplay conventions of the genre. This convention stems from a “socially objectified need” or “exigence,” which Miller would argue are one of the sources of genre creation, to be able to fight monsters outside of a turn-based system in a roleplaying game.³⁰ Game technology finally allowed for more real-time development in emerging and existing genres, and players were eager for these real-time options for games centered around roleplay or direct involvement with your character. Turn-based combat really removes a player from that direct experience, as discussed further below. *Diablo* set a precedent that not only defines future games but also relates back to what Bódi calls “the brand identity of the franchise.”³¹

This is slightly different from the design ethos as defined by Bódi because the brand identity refers specifically to the games themselves while design ethos refers to the studio. The brand identity of *Diablo* and the artistic design ethos for Blizzard North directly relate to genre, as gameplay and design choices define the ARPG genre from the very first installment. I would argue that the design ethos is defined by these choices, as they relate to the way in which the studio expresses its own identity as one which takes these kinds of artistic risks that result in said new genre. Both the franchise’s brand identity and the design ethos of the studio are affected by future choices to go against or remain consistent with the first game’s definition of what an ARPG is. Real-time combat, as opposed to turn-based combat, is one of those defining factors. Because time is so central to this concept, a discussion of agency as it relates to time is highly relevant here.

³⁰ Miller, “Genre in Ancient and Networked Media,” 180.

³¹ Bódi, *Videogames and Agency*, 6.

The agency offered to players in a real-time game versus a turn-based game is one that was revolutionary in the case of *Diablo*. Turn-based roleplaying games required players to consider time in terms of each turn and suspended time for as long as it took for a player to decide what to do. A real-time game “offers players maximum freedom; they always have something to do and can order their activities any way they like.”³² As Ernest Adams points out, “it’s also more immersive than turn-based gaming...waiting your turn while other players act harms suspension of disbelief.”³³ Bódi states that “temporal agency is best described as the possibility for action as afforded and constrained within the temporal structures that constitute a game’s design.”³⁴ The pacing of gameplay in *Diablo* is fast and requires quick reactions on the part of the player. This means that, temporally, a player is not constrained by how long their opponent’s turn takes. They are free to act as much as they can between opposing attacks, thus allowing for a higher amount of player action or agency than one is afforded in a turn-based roleplaying game.

Real-time action in *Diablo* made it a huge hit, and the randomization of dungeons, monsters, and items that made playing the game over and over so enticing had rave reviews. Some went so far as to say that “its outward appearance of simplicity veils an inner complexity, nuance and design genius that is revealed to players through replays, meaning we can’t begin to appreciate or understand the depth of the game by playing once only.”³⁵ Trent Ward said, merely weeks after the game’s release, that “*Diablo* is the

³² Ernest Adams, *Fundamentals of Game Design* (Pearson Education, 2014), 479.

³³ *Ibid.*

³⁴ Bódi, *Videogames and Agency*, 51.

³⁵ Lilura. “Diablo 1 Review,” n.d. <https://lilura1.blogspot.com/p/diablo-1.html>.

best game to come out in the past year, and you should own a copy. Period.”³⁶ It currently has a metascore of 94% and a user score of 8.6/10 on *Metacritic*, a well-known website for user inputs and ratings.³⁷ *Diablo* also ushered in Blizzard’s first use of Battle.net, which allowed multiplayer gameplay without the need for local networks or PC’s connected to one another.³⁸ This game changed the landscape for Blizzard in a massive way both by defining the ARPG genre³⁹ as well as introducing the gaming world to wide-ranged online play via Battle.net—all hosted from a single computer in Blizzard HQ.⁴⁰

Procedurally, or algorithmically, generated loot and dungeon maps are norms for any game that wants to call itself an ARPG. In the case of procedurally generated content, which is conventional for the genre, we must also consider the affordances to player agency that this procedurally generated content has. Most relevant to a discussion of randomized maps and items is Bódi’s conception of spatial and explorative agency. For Bódi, “a spatial framing of agency allows us to ask questions concerning the possibility space comprised of movements the avatar can and cannot perform in individual videogame spaces.”⁴¹ On the other hand, explorative agency refers to the ability to explore a game’s space rather than the space itself as designed or the avatar’s types of movement.⁴² Randomizing these spaces, as *Diablo* does with its dungeon, allows

³⁶ Trent Ward, “Diablo Review,” GameSpot, January 23, 1997, <https://www.gamespot.com/reviews/diablo-review/1900-2538662/>.

³⁷ “Diablo,” Metacritic, December 31, 1996, <https://www.metacritic.com/game/pc/diablo>.

³⁸ See Wes Fenlon, “The Story of Battle.Net,” Pcgamer, November 15, 2020, <https://www.pcgamer.com/the-story-of-battlenet/> for a full discussion of Battle.net, how it was developed, and its implications on the gaming industry at large.

³⁹ Stieg Hedlund, “The Future of the ARPG,” Medium, June 9, 2016, <https://medium.com/deru-kugi/the-future-of-the-arpg-36775abd6b16>.

⁴⁰ Evan Lahti, “Diablo’s Battle.Net Originally Ran on a Single PC,” PCgamer, March 18, 2016, <https://www.pcgamer.com/diablos-battlenet-originally-ran-on-a-single-pc/>.

⁴¹ Bódi, *Videogames and Agency*, 45.

⁴² *Ibid.*, 46.

for almost infinite agency in this regard—there is a never-ending source of spaces to move around in with constantly shifting perimeters to explore. This unlimited set of spaces is greatly diminished in *Diablo Immortal* and serves as one of the major ways in which that game deviates far from the original design ethos and brand identity for the franchise—agency in this case is very constrained and will be discussed further in chapter three.

The gameplay in the first *Diablo* was straightforward despite its ingenuity. According to Brevik, the other two major ways in which the game went “right” were the inclusion and invention of Battle.net, the first multiplayer service built inside a game, and the simplistic interface that allowed anyone to approach *Diablo* and not get overwhelmed with character creation or too many menus.⁴³ There were originally three playable classes, the warrior, rogue, and sorcerer, that each had only one unique skill, while the other differences included their attribute specialization and graphic design elements—the voice acting for each was different as well; the monk was released with *Diablo: Hellfire* later that year.⁴⁴ In her framework, Bódi refers to the ability to modify “avatar characteristics” as “configurative agency.”⁴⁵ This first step of choosing a class for a player also consists of the first moment of afforded agency—the character creation process. It is “one of the key components of role-playing games,” and given that there is still the acronym RPG in the genre ARPG, this process is equally key for the *Diablo* franchise.⁴⁶ Being able to choose which type of player one wants to be—a healer, tank, or

⁴³ Brevik, “Classic Game Postmortem: Diablo.”

⁴⁴ For all discussions of gameplay for each game, I will be pulling the information from the games themselves.

⁴⁵ Bódi, *Videogames and Agency*, 54.

⁴⁶ *Ibid.*

damage-dealer—allows for players to define part of their gameplay style and has “implications for the avatar both in a ludic and a representational sense.”⁴⁷ Essentially, this choice affords players agency to define what kind of combat they will engage in and how their avatar is able to respond. In the case of multiplayer play, the player can define their role within the group by this choice.

However, even in *Hellfire*, one could play by themselves for the entire game, or they could log in to Battle.net and play with their friends. Playing solo further places importance on that initial player choice of class, as now they will be forced to figure out how to be self-sustainable as the class that they chose. The other key here is that the multiplayer option was not a requirement for the game. One could defeat Diablo alone. Also important is that the only two purchasable things for the original game were the game itself and later the expansion. Once you owned these two items, you had spent all the money that Blizzard Entertainment required to access the entirety of the available content. These points regarding multiplayer play and purchasable content are important for later discussions regarding *Diablo Immortal* and its forcing players into a position to buy more items or to play with others, both of which directly affect player agency.

It should be noted that *Hellfire* was made by a sister company, Sierra, and not by the original team at the request of Davidson & Associates, the parent company of Blizzard Entertainment which was owned by Cendant Corporation. David Brevik did not approve of the expansion’s contents or implementation.⁴⁸ This represents the first “cash

⁴⁷ Ibid. Healers and damage dealers may be self-explanatory as the former being those who heal damage or protect characters from damage while the latter inflict damage as their primary role, but tanks refer to characters that can absorb a lot of damage—much like an actual tank can withstand a lot of direct impact.

⁴⁸ Brevik, “Classic Game Postmortem: Diablo.”

grab” from the parent company, wherein content was created without a care for quality or consistency.⁴⁹ Pat Wyatt, VP of research and development at Blizzard Entertainment, recalls that everyone had fought tooth and nail against an expansion for the game. They resisted so hard because “we felt the quality would be destroyed by having someone external work on it.”⁵⁰ The decision to have an outside studio work on the game foreshadows the first of many poor decisions regarding external development in the *Diablo* franchise. Specifically, higher-up corporate owners that have nothing to do with video game development dictate what to create to make money. Matt Householder, a producer at Blizzard North at the time, recalls “the only outside development that ever worked in Blizzard history was Blizzard North. Every other outside studio has had its projects canceled or released against Blizzard’s will.”⁵¹ Whenever the franchise passes outside of Blizzard’s hands, we are given a subpar product. This makes one question the inclusion of NetEase as co-developer for *Diablo Immortal*. Nevertheless, *Diablo: Hellfire* did not completely tank the success of the first *Diablo* game.

The massive success of the game can be affixed almost entirely upon the loot system. K. Thor Jensen summarizes this best by reminding us that “collecting treasure has been a key element of role-playing since the *Dungeons & Dragons* game...[and] *Diablo* blew the doors off of that concept.”⁵² Players were always looking for the next best item, and because the items were randomized, the gameplay required to upgrade

⁴⁹ For a deeper dive into how sneaky David & Associates was with this decision of having an outside developer work on the expansion, see “Chapter 3: Kicking and Screaming” or “Chapter 10: Full Disclosure” in David Craddock’s *Stay Awhile and Listen: Book II: Heaven, Hell, and Secret Cow Levels* (DM Press, 2019).

⁵⁰ Craddock, *Stay Awhile and Listen: Book II: Heaven, Hell, and Secret Cow Level*, 24.

⁵¹ *Ibid.*, 21.

⁵² Jensen, “25 Years Ago, Diablo Invented the Loot Game.”

your character was endless by constantly changing and evolving. Again, the player agency here is at a high, allowing for extensive replayability and character customization through weapon attributes and high levels of player configuration. The death and inventory systems also made the game deliciously challenging, as you had a set amount of space for things and dropped all your items upon defeat. These factors made the process of looting risky and fraught with important decision making and strategy while crawling through the repeatable dungeons. While the original game faded away and became unavailable after years of being active, in 2017, Blizzard announced that they would re-release remastered classics soon, and in 2019, they released *Diablo* digitally on GOG.com for \$9.99.⁵³

Diablo II

After the creation of *Diablo*, the team at Blizzard North was, understandably, burnt out. While they were asking themselves what they would consider working on next over a break of about three or four months, the team decided that they had some issues with *Diablo* that they wanted to address in a second game and “make it better than we did the last time.”⁵⁴ They had also lost a few of their employees along the way—the seemingly unfair treatment towards the original three founders of Condor and their

⁵³ Blizzard Entertainment, “Diablo Now Available on GOG.COM,” June 6, 2019, <https://news.blizzard.com/en-us/diablo3/22887361/diablo-now-available-on-gog-com>.

⁵⁴ See Brevik, “A Devil Makes History – Classic Post Mortem on Diablo 2.”; Kat Bailey, “An Oral History of Diablo II With David Brevik, Max Schaefer, and Erich Schaefer,” *VG247*, December 24, 2015, <https://www.vg247.com/an-oral-history-of-diablo-ii-with-david-brevik-max-schaefer-and-erich-schaefer.>; Erich Schaefer, “Postmortem: Blizzard’s *Diablo II*,” *Game Developer*, October 25, 2000, <https://www.gamedeveloper.com/design/postmortem-blizzard-s-i-diablo-ii-i-#close-modal.>; and David L. Craddock, *Stay Awhile and Listen: Book II: Heaven, Hell, and Secret Cow Levels* (DM Press, 2019). For more information on the development and history of *Diablo II*.

massive incomes compared to the rest of the team began to create distrust and resentment. While the original three (David, Max, and Erich) were getting fancy new cars and showing off their newfound wealth, others began to feel as if they were being short-changed as they drove their same old beat-up cars to work and saw no significant increase to their salaries. While much of the original team remained, some left due to this difficult fracture in the ranks.⁵⁵ One can understand, with the overwhelming success of *Diablo*, that these team members would have expected similar financial experiences, especially when so many people said that the game was a record-breaking, genre-defining titan in the gaming industry. It was such an important game that it started a franchise within Blizzard Entertainment, and Blizzard South gave full reign of *Diablo II* to Blizzard North—it was their baby, and any sequels would also be up to them.⁵⁶ This is an example of how studio and franchise are intricately tied together—the ethos of each being simultaneously defined.

Unlike the first game, *Diablo II* never had an official design document, so the creative process from start to finish for this game is conveyed primarily through interviews and articles from the original three major team members: David Brevik, Max Schaefer, and Erich Schaefer. All three have discussed their desire to counteract the rampant cheating that occurred in *Diablo* due to its peer-to-peer networking. Essentially, players could change whatever they wanted within their own games through modifications, and this, according to Bòdi, afforded a very high level of “constructive agency,” wherein “the player is allowed to change the spaces within which the avatar

⁵⁵ Craddock, *Stay Awhile and Listen: Book II: Heaven, Hell, and Secret Cow Level*, 40-42.

⁵⁶ *Ibid.*, 47.

exists, and more importantly, acts.”⁵⁷ Players were able to make modifications that changed all sorts of things like the health and damage for monsters and bosses, additional content for the dungeons, or entire maps—even allowing them to make their own items. Thus, these mods were both configurative and constructive, affording players agency to change their avatars and their surroundings to their hearts’ content.

But the creative team did not quite realize that once they connected to other players, they could share these hacks within other players’ worlds. Further complicating things were those that would kill other players in open or public games. Often, player killers (or PK-ers) would wait until a boss had been almost defeated, kill the other player, and loot everything both from the player and from the boss under the false pretense of “helping.” Brevik says that they wanted to make a legitimate online version with an “economy that means something.”⁵⁸ To do this, it was decided that *Diablo II* would use a client-server model wherein the game’s world was not determined by players’ individual computers but a server that updated each players’ world through constant check-in-pings. This method is the most popular for games, as it is the more secure option for maintaining an online game community. However, at the time, this was revolutionary.

An interesting philosophy that Blizzard North embodied was that everyone, no matter what their job title, could contribute to the game’s development because everyone on the team was a gamer. Brevik says that “a lot of times video game companies, publishers and whatnot, were filled with businessmen that really didn’t play games, but everybody at Blizzard North was a gaming fanatic...and because of that, they contributed

⁵⁷ Bódi, *Videogames and Agency*, 56.

⁵⁸ Brevik, “A Devil Makes History – Classic Post Mortem on Diablo 2.”

design ideas.”⁵⁹ He attributes the overwhelming success of Blizzard North to this mass collaborative effort, and I am inclined to agree with him here. *Diablo II* had a very collaborative and focused small team of around forty to fifty people that all were passionate about games in a way that massively affected the development of the game. With so many people’s insights and careful attention, especially if all people involved are privy to the experience of gaming, it’s no wonder *Diablo II* was such a huge success and historically influential game. Here, again, we see the professional design ethos of the team shaping into creating games with a small, focused group that works collaboratively on its product.

Erich Schaefer says that “we wanted to improve upon every aspect of the original” and lists many improvements and additions that they had planned for *Diablo II*: more towns, five classes that were different from the first three, an array of new dungeons instead of one, so many more items and skills.⁶⁰ Their graphics were up for a lot of debate, as they had experienced the revolutionary polygonal three-dimensional graphics from the likes of *EverQuest*, a game that they all played together—David more than anyone else. They ultimately decided on a “quasi-3D perspective mode” with improved graphics, colored lighting, and new looks for armor.⁶¹ The new game looked immaculate for the time, and I, for one, am very glad that they did not go with the clunky polygons in their graphics. I think that it would not have served the game well in its place as part of the franchise’s legacy and would have gone against the aesthetics defined by

⁵⁹ Ibid.

⁶⁰ Schaefer, “Postmortem: Blizzard’s *Diablo II*.”

⁶¹ Ibid.

the design ethos and brand identity of the franchise—having that drastic shift would have been far too jarring.

The “quasi” in their three-dimensional model meant that they mapped their two-dimensional plane over the polygonal shapes instead of having the shapes be the visual layer—providing a rich depth to the game’s aesthetic.⁶² Adding to the game’s breadth, *Diablo II* markedly changed the landscape by integrating more environments beyond just the main city, Tristram, and the dungeon’s multiple levels. This new world included the great outdoors. Though it was later considered a failure by some due to its detractor from the strategy of the game, running was included in *Diablo II* to allow for quick exploration and escape.⁶³ The inclusion of running opened up a spatial agency for players that expanded their ability to move within the game’s space, while the explorative agency was greatly increased by the inclusion of new environments and overarching maps to explore. Revolutionarily, these lands also got rid of one of the most frustrating things for games at the time: zoning or loading new maps. This further reduced the constraints on players’ spatial agency because “movement within representation space” is not interrupted.⁶⁴ The process of leaving one area and entering a new one often required loading time in many games, including the original *Diablo*, yet *Diablo II* removed these waiting periods by circumventing them with new algorithms. Loading screens were only present during transitions between Acts, and these were shortened as much as possible by the game’s code.⁶⁵ Another first for the industry came with the global difficulty curve,

⁶² Brevik, “A Devil Makes History – Classic Post Mortem on Diablo 2.”

⁶³ Craddock, *Stay Awhile and Listen: Book II: Heaven, Hell, and Secret Cow Levels*. 108.

⁶⁴ Bódi, *Videogames and Agency*, 46.

⁶⁵ Craddock, *Stay Awhile and Listen: Book II: Heaven, Hell, and Secret Cow Levels*. 88.

wherein the development team could change a single variable to affect any area's difficulty.⁶⁶

One of the most influential changes for *Diablo II* came from a famous David Brevik shower idea: the advent of skill trees. Skill trees are branching options for players to choose how to customize their character—usually comprised of abilities or “skills” that players choose between as they advance down the branches. Skill trees allow players to experience the same character class differently as they get deeper into the game. A developer on the *Diablo II* team, Stieg Hedland, came up with the trees' design; they would have a base skill and then branch off into three different paths with a total of thirty skills per class that got progressively more potent as players got towards the bottom of each path.⁶⁷ Further, each skill or ability could be upgraded up to twenty times to allow for increased potency on the lower end of the branches as players level up their characters or allow players to mix and match their branches and create characters with a variety of skills to choose from.⁶⁸ However, characters could only reach level ninety-nine and, using simple math, would not be able to max out all of their skills. Players had to choose where they wanted each point to go as they could never “fill” the whole tree. David liked the trees introduced in strategy games and the multi-class options available via *Dungeons & Dragons*, so he included something that is now a staple in games that feature multiple classes. Agency here relates to avatar customizability, and, in the case of skill trees, this affords high levels of player agency to choose how to build their character.

⁶⁶ Ibid., 166.

⁶⁷ Ibid., 91.

⁶⁸ Ibid., 92.

Crafting was now an option—something that David enjoyed in his forays in *EverQuest*. *Diablo II* included the Horadric Cube, an item that allowed players to combine small items to create or enhance new items like armor, potions, and the like. Again, we are seeing another way in which player agency is expanded by the customizability of items in the game and the variation of types of play afforded to the player. Originally, the team had thought that they would use body parts as their substrates for this crafting. This created an office-wide debate wherein some thought the body parts were perfectly gruesome for the aesthetic of the franchise. The other half thought that it was far too disgusting to include in the final cut of *Diablo II*. Ultimately, they decided against the body parts, which sparked many to post signs on their doors that read something along the lines of “Bring back the body parts.”⁶⁹ They also decided to use potions instead of automatic regeneration, as the latter required a much slower gameplay as players waited for their health or mana to come back.⁷⁰

One of the most memorable and legendary parts of *Diablo II* was the secret cow level. This level could be reached by combining very rare, strange, and specific items in the Horadric Cube. The birth of the secret cow level came not only from forums from the original *Diablo* game, where players thought that the cows near the town had to hold some significance, but also from an April Fool’s joke turned reality. What was originally a nod to their fanbase became part of the game when Rick Seis whipped up the level to be included in the final cut of *Diablo II*.⁷¹ Further hilarious is that the artists of the team provided the moo’ing of the cows by each, in turn, recording themselves saying the word

⁶⁹ Brevik, “A Devil Makes History – Classic Post Mortem on Diablo 2.”

⁷⁰ Craddock, *Stay Awhile and Listen: Book II: Heaven, Hell, and Secret Cow Levels*. 136.

⁷¹ *Ibid.*, 175.

‘moo.’⁷² The inclusion of easter-eggs like the cow level were common for many roleplaying games and added the important interaction between studio and fanbase that helped establish a fan-considering ethos behind the *Diablo* development teams. Given how conventional easter-eggs have become for Blizzard games, this exemplifies one of the ways in which *Diablo II* upheld and enforced this history for the studio and began it in the franchise. Importantly, *Diablo III* has its own cow level, while *Diablo Immortal* does not. *Diablo II* released, cow level included, in June of 2000 after a year and a half of a crunch. It was originally thought that the game would release for Christmas in 1999, with the crunch starting in the Spring of 1999—unfortunately, this was wishful thinking on the part of the development team.⁷³ Brevik himself only took three days off during the entire grind.⁷⁴

Within the first day of being on the shelves, *Diablo II* sold 184,000 copies, within a week sold one million, and within six weeks sold two million.⁷⁵ “[*Diablo II*] named fastest-selling game of the time by the Guinness Book of World Records in 2000—to be surpassed only by other Blizzard-published titles such as 2002’s *WarCraft III*, various *World of Warcraft* expansions, and 2012’s *Diablo III*.”⁷⁶ The expansion, *Lord of Destruction*, arrived on shelves almost exactly one year later on June 29th, 2001 and sold over one million units within the month, “making it the fastest-selling expansion for a PC game.”⁷⁷ The game was, obviously, equally if not more successful than its predecessor. In

⁷² Ibid., 176.

⁷³ Brevik, “A Devil Makes History – Classic Post Mortem on Diablo 2.”

⁷⁴ Ibid.

⁷⁵ Craddock, *Stay Awhile and Listen: Book II: Heaven, Hell, and Secret Cow Levels*. 217.

⁷⁶ Ibid., 218.

⁷⁷ Ibid., 241.

a review from 2012, over a decade later, *Diablo II* is lauded as having fixed everything problematic from *Diablo* while maintaining and expanding upon everything that went right with the original game.⁷⁸ Even in a review from 2022, Cale Hunt describes *Diablo II* as still being their favorite ARPG of all time, over twenty years after its release.⁷⁹ *Diablo II* currently has a Metacritic score of 88% with a user score of 8.8/10, which, though lower rated by the website, is a higher user score than the original game.⁸⁰ Of course, there will always be critics that view the game as worse than the original, though the overwhelming majority seems to agree that *Diablo II* cemented and grew the franchise's fanbase substantially.

Most of the positive nostalgia for the game would not exist without both the expansion and the 1.10 patch that seemed to round out the game, fix the bugs, and add a lot of the well-known endgame content that is fondly remembered today. David Brevik says:

It's funny because one of the things that people don't recall, and a lot of people today, especially younger people today, they don't even understand, is that the game was not super well-received when it came out, but when we put out the expansion a year later, that made a massive difference in people's opinions of the product...and then in 2003, the 1.10 patch changed a lot of things and put in synergies and all sorts of things. So I think that those kind of things, they see where it is, but they don't see the journey.⁸¹

Lord of Destruction, the only expansion for *Diablo II*, was something that began within months of the release of its main game. The Blizzard North crew split into three factions

⁷⁸ Old Game Hermit, "Review: Diablo II," *Old Game Hermit*, June 24, 2023, <https://www.oldgamehermit.com/2012/09/review-diablo-ii/>.

⁷⁹ Cale Hunt, "Why Diablo II Is Still My Favorite Action RPG 20 Years Later," *Windows Central*, May 20, 2022, <https://www.windowscentral.com/diablo-2-nostalgia>.

⁸⁰ Metacritic. "Diablo II," June 28, 2000. <https://www.metacritic.com/game/pc/diablo-ii>.

⁸¹ Bailey, "An Oral History of Diablo II With David Brevik, Max Schaefer, and Erich Schaefer."

after the end of their crunch for *Diablo II*: one was headed by Max Schaefer and tackled *Lord of Destruction* and eventually began initial progress on *Diablo III*, one worked with Dave Brevik and Erich Schaefer to try and come up with some new title game, and the third just worked on whatever they wanted to.⁸² David and Erich's team was the least focused, as Brevik was going through a meltdown while navigating a divorce and playing *EverQuest* almost constantly—he lacked the energy to manage his team.⁸³ As the teams split for their work, they also begin fracturing into cliques. The general environment shifts to one of negative politicking and general burnout as the team attempts to move forward after such a long and stressful crunch to get *Diablo II* out.⁸⁴

This fracturing in the ranks colors the next big changes within Blizzard North. Evan Carroll, an artist, says “I feel like part of the reason things didn't work out was that those three weren't actively managing together...those three kind of needed to be together to get something out the door.”⁸⁵ With the major three leaders' focus divided and the separate teams working on their own projects, no one was prepared for what was to come. On August 7th, 2002, Vivendi, then owner of Blizzard Entertainment, put their gaming division up for sale.⁸⁶ In order to gain leverage with the company's decision-making process and attempt to maintain autonomy of Blizzard North, David, Max, and Erich tendered resignations—none of them expected that Vivendi would accept their resignations instead of negotiating with them.⁸⁷ On June 30th, 2003, Dave, Max, and

⁸² Craddock, *Stay Awhile and Listen: Book II: Heaven, Hell, and Secret Cow Levels*, 260.

⁸³ *Ibid.*, 257.

⁸⁴ *Ibid.*, 270.

⁸⁵ *Ibid.*, 253.

⁸⁶ *Ibid.*, 286.

⁸⁷ *Ibid.*, 289.

Erich left Blizzard North.⁸⁸ They joined Bill Roper and a few other employees to found Flagship Studios, which only lasted until 2008 and released one game, *Hellgate: London*.⁸⁹ “Within the first hour of the bosses’ departure, the atmosphere in the office darkened.”⁹⁰ The three leaders had been integral for the creation of both *Diablo* and *Diablo II*, and without them, it was a bleak future for the entire team. What followed is typical of a huge change in leadership: Blizzard South sent up representatives to go through the remaining employees and perform interviews to determine who should stay and who should go, and on July 11th, 2003, less than two weeks after the team lost their fearless leaders, Blizzard South fired about a third of the North team and appointed Rick Seis as the new lead for their North branch.⁹¹

Now looking at a skeleton crew, the company was headed for some more huge changes overall in the coming years. After passing hands from parent company to parent company, Blizzard Entertainment’s two branches were understandably nervous every time there was a new buyout or merger:

Every change in ownership resulted in turbulence: from Davidson & Associates, to CUC, to Cendant, to French water company Havas in November 1998, then as one part of Vivendi Universal Publishing under Havas in the spring of 2001, and then as Vivendi Universal (VU) Games that November, the result of consolidating VU Publishing’s two halves.⁹²

⁸⁸ Ibid., 291.

⁸⁹ “Flagship Studios - MobyGames,” MobyGames, n.d., <https://www.mobygames.com/company/4165/flagship-studios/>.

⁹⁰ Craddock. *Stay Awhile and Listen: Book II: Heaven, Hell, and Secret Cow Levels*, 296.

⁹¹ Ibid., 302-9.

⁹² Ibid., 189.

With another impending sale of the company, Blizzard North attempted to continue work on *Diablo III* and their assorted other projects as they moved forward under Seis' guidance. This, unfortunately, did not last.

Conclusion

I have discussed the legacy that was created by the first two installments of the *Diablo* franchise. Bettina Bódi, in discussing game design lineages, points out that her case studies include “a historical narrative of studios keeping such game design lineages alive, reconstructed primarily using the respective studios’ communications.”⁹³ I have attempted to do the same with my first chapter by following the historical lineage of the franchise, tracing its development and the design ethos of the studio behind the games as I did so. This chapter established Bódi’s “design ethos” of the studio in that I looked at “how they communicate their professional and artistic identity, what the aesthetics are of the games they produce over time, and how these are reported on in trade press and in journalistic outlets.”⁹⁴ I also discussed the player agency afforded by certain conventions of the ARPG genre as it was birthed by the first game in the series as well as agency afforded by other aspects of the games. My focus on genre is important, as Bódi specifically chooses to leave genre out of her discussion of game design lineages, as genre “tends to lack connotative consistency.”⁹⁵

While this is true of most conceptions of genre, if we look at genre as socially constructed, as Carolyn Miller does, we can see that using social expectations to define

⁹³ Bódi, *Videogames and Agency*, 3.

⁹⁴ *Ibid.*

⁹⁵ *Ibid.*

conventions can be studied through the same game reviews and paratexts that Bódi uses in her case studies. Not only do the socially constructed expectations for genre help define what is expected of an iteration in a franchise, they also help define what a studio is expected to produce and, thus, help define the design ethos for the studio behind the games. This is especially true when a game is designed that defines its own genre, as is the case with the *Diablo* series and ARPGs. This chapter outlines how the genre was formed, which expectations or conventions were established for design choices in future iterations of the franchise, and the initial professional identity of the studio.

The design ethos of the team behind the first two *Diablo* games was relatively cohesive. They had established expectations for releasing ARPGs with randomized loot and maps, fast-paced action and combat, and a dark aesthetic to match the plot's theme of demons taking over the world. Some of these elements were also now genre conventions for ARPGs—most notably, the randomized maps and loot and the pace of combat. Each of these latter elements directly contributes to the games' affordances of player agency in multiple dimensions as defined by Bódi. Now, looking at a crew with few recognizable faces, it is obvious that the artistic ethos of the team behind the next installment could go in a very different direction given the high turnover. Unless the new team behind *Diablo III* decided to closely follow what its predecessors had done, the design ethos and franchise brand identity were bound to change in some way.

CHAPTER II: THE BLUNDERS

The loud clacking of a keyboard as I frantically mashed buttons was nearly deafening as I maneuvered my avatar about the screen—desperately trying to get her to slay the hordes of demons surrounding her tiny visage compared to the vastness of the onslaught. The horde closed in on my character, blocking my movements and suppressing my ability to strategically return attacks, until my beautiful spellcaster fell to the ground, dead. I angrily removed my headphones and slid my chair away from the desk, placing my hands on my face to massage the stress from my brow. Determined, I then moved back to my computer—complete with energy drinks and the crunchy, salty snacks that kept me fueled for battle—and tried the dungeon run again. This game, *Diablo III*, had a similar feel to its gameplay and pace of action as the previous two in the franchise. I would play it for hours with my partner in our bedroom on two separate computers, leaning over to look at each other and smile or frown depending on the scenario that just played out on our screens. The design of the game felt familiar, and the experience of playing it often brought about a sense of nostalgia for the time when ARPG's were first born all those years ago, playing in a basement with my friends.

In this chapter, I will begin by examining the third installment of the series. I will pay attention to the history of the team behind the game, following the professional design ethos established throughout the game's development. I will then look at how the game changed from the first two games in the franchise and discuss how these major

changes directly affect the player agency afforded by *Diablo III*. This will mark the first big decisions that redefine the design ethos artistically. Next, I will zoom out quite a bit to talk about the professional ethos of the whole studio as I examine lawsuits and scandals that the company became embroiled in before the release of *Diablo Immortal*. As Bódi puts it, this reconstructs design ethos in terms of how the studio is “reported on in trade press and in journalistic outlets.”¹ These lawsuits set the tone for how players and fans view Activision Blizzard as a company rather than the specific team responsible for the *Diablo* franchise. I find it important to examine these incidents because they directly impact fan opinion and, thus, impact social expectations regarding what the company releases post-scandals. I will first examine lawsuits surrounding the company’s internal culture and its cases of sexual harassment, as these issues color fan expectations regarding diversity, equality, and representation in their video games as a result of said internal culture. I will then look to the lawsuits surrounding their other large mobile game, *Hearthstone*, as these impact expectations for the company’s subsequent release of another game under the mobile genre. This is crucial because, as Miller puts it, “genres are, after all, not natural or theoretical categories but ‘sociocognitive’ categories, that is, shared recognitions and mutual expectations.”²

After covering lawsuits, it is pertinent to consider the addition of a new company to co-develop *Diablo Immortal*, NetEase, and its own design ethos as that now relates both to the franchise’s brand identity moving forward and to social expectations on the choice of mobile game genre under this new design team. When I then look to the

¹ Bódi, *Videogames and Agency*, 3.

² Miller, “Genre in Ancient And Networked Media,” 179.

announcement of *Diablo Immortal* at BlizzCon 2018, Blizzard's own convention specifically for their fanbase, we can conclude the chapter with a direct sense of how fans felt when they first found out about the design choice to release a mobile game instead of one for PCs and consoles. It is important to note that BlizzCon 2018 occurs before most lawsuits discussed in the chapter, and, as such, demonstrates the already negative public opinion for the game prior to release and prior to the scandals discussed that further affect the design ethos of the studio and social expectations for the game itself. While the convention and *Diablo*-specific panels were still jam-packed with fans, the loud "boo" of the crowd when it is announced that *Diablo Immortal* will be a mobile-exclusive is hard to reckon with. This is where it becomes crystal clear that fans were not excited to hear that the next *Diablo* game was going to be on a mobile platform and thus were not approving of the choice to switch genres for this next installment.

In this chapter, I will be pulling from similar sources as I used for chapter one's discussions of *Diablo* and *Diablo II* while talking about *Diablo III*. However, when discussing lawsuits, NetEase, and BlizzCon 2018, I will be moving more towards the kinds of paratexts that Bódi utilizes in her later chapters of *Videogames and Agency*. These paratexts—reviews, games news articles, fan responses, and so forth—give an exclusive look at how the ethos of the company is being formed through the eyes of the public. In other words, I use the very opinions of and reporting by those on the outside to provide examples and proof of the shifts in ethos as it relates to the legal battles with, and business decisions made by, the studio. This allows for a more nuanced consideration of the design ethos of the studio as it exists beyond mere design choices for the games themselves and provides a look at new and different expectations for the development

teams behind upcoming releases—particularly as these impact social expectations surrounding the release of *Diablo Immortal*.

Diablo III

Let us look back to *Diablo III* and its changes in design team as well as its changes to the design ethos and franchise brand identity of the first two games. In August of 2005, Blizzard merged its North and South branches, leading to more North employees leaving the company, including Rick Seis himself.³ Rick Seis joined the crew of other ex-North employees at Castaway Studios, but this group, much like Flagship Studios, did not last more than a few years.⁴ At this point, Blizzard had lost most of the original *Diablo* development team. In December of 2007, Activision’s purchase of and merger with Vivendi was announced—the merger finalized on July 10th, 2008, with the new company named Activision Blizzard, dropping Vivendi’s title entirely.⁵ With all these changes in the company, it’s no wonder that there was such a hiatus, around twelve years, between the releases of *Diablo II* and *III*. The previous *Diablo* games had excellent postmortem talks from Brevik alongside full-length books by David Craddock, while *III* had a multi-part interview at Diablolii.net with game director Jay Wilson, appointed in 2006 after the merging of North and South and shortly after his hire at the company, that has since been

³ Nich Maragos, “Blizzard Merges Blizzard North into Blizzard South,” *Game Developer*, August 1, 2005, <https://www.gamedeveloper.com/pc/blizzard-merges-blizzard-north-into-blizzard-south>.

⁴ Robert “Apache” Howarth, “Another Blizzard North Boss Defects - IGN,” *IGN*, June 16, 2012, <https://www.ign.com/articles/2005/09/07/another-blizzard-north-boss-defects>.

⁵ Leigh Alexander, “Activision Blizzard Merger Finalized,” *Kotaku*, June 21, 2013, <https://kotaku.com/activision-blizzard-merger-finalized-5023808>.

scrubbed from the internet. Games journalist Jason Schreier, in his book *Blood, Sweat, and Pixels*, covers a lot of what happened after the game came out as well as the major changes made between the original content and the expansion that I will discuss later. There are other interviews, but most of them are from before the game's release and much of the content no longer holds true of the actual game that came out. There is also an hour-long talk that Jay Wilson gave at GDC in 2013 masquerading as a postmortem, but it lacks the detail and company history that made Brevik's talks so much richer for projects like my own.

Jay Wilson's talk brings up what he calls "core pillars" that the team behind *III* wanted to stick to in their making of the game, and these pillars loosely describe important facets of the first two games, while his descriptions of them in action do not quite give enough explanation of what was going on behind the scenes at the company during any of these decision making moments—all decisions seemed to be made based on what best adhered to these pillars, making the talk incredibly cyclical.⁶ He also spent a lot of time waffling between praising and insulting the previous games; at one point, he describes playing *Diablo* with one hand for the mouse and the other for shoveling snacks into one's mouth as a primary reason to love playing—something that many comments quickly tore apart as false and obviously derogatory towards both fans and the games themselves.⁷ The entire talk feels more like a sales pitch or an attempt to convince people that *Diablo III* was an overall success, and Wilson leaves no time for questions at the end.

⁶ GDC, "South at the Devil: The Making of Diablo III," October 14, 2015, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=FG10e0-JyjY>.

⁷ Ibid.

In general, the hour-long presentation felt like a waste of time in terms of learning the process by which the game was developed.

However, the talk is rich with examples of how Jay Wilson and his team went about dealing with the design ethos and genre conventions of the first two games. This is something that is generally lacking in the postmortems provided by Brevik and the Schaefer brothers, who are far more concerned about the nitty gritty of actual development and the behind-the-scenes story of the development team. This could also be due to the delay in time between game release and the talks given. Brevik and the Schaefer brothers spoke about their forays with *Diablo* and *Diablo II* years after their release, almost directly to an audience of long-time fans and developers who were already highly aware of the game itself. Their focus on the behind-the-scenes story and a nostalgic covering of what it was like back then to develop games before graphics exploded into complexity and development teams became hundreds or thousands of people has a cozy feeling to it that reminds the audience of what it used to be like in the gaming world—both as gamers and as developers. Jay Wilson, on the other hand, is speaking about his game at a talk around a year after the release of *Diablo III*. It makes sense that his talk feels more like a sales pitch than a walk down memory lane. He is speaking to people that only recently played through the campaign, if they did at all, and people that are looking at what developing games at that moment felt like. He was not just trying to explain what developing a sequel in a franchise you've never worked on before is like, he was also doing damage control for a game that, at that moment, was not critically well received. It makes a lot of sense for him to be bringing up the conventions

as laid out by the first two games in the franchise and describing how *Diablo III* lives up to or defies them.

Jay Wilson begins his talk by defining his career in terms of genre: “mostly a mix of RTS’s and action games. I actually started on first person shooters...there’s a formula there.”⁸ He also speaks of inheriting a franchise—this would entail the inheritance of a design ethos, though he doesn’t use the term ‘ethos’ in his talk. His biggest concern is to balance between staying true to this series, or its franchise brand identity, and how much change is acceptable. This is because, he says, “if you completely play it safe, you’re going to have a team of people that...are going to be bored, going to be frustrated” because it’s stagnant and is akin to “creative death.”⁹ On the other hand, “you can reinvent the wheel...and this is super exciting,” but “the problem is, this doesn’t really honor the subject matter you’re paying tribute to.”¹⁰ This balance between changing the design and remaining loyal to it directly effects the design ethos and franchise brand identity of a game in a series. He states that “if you’ve inherited an IP, or you’re making a sequel, it’s because there was something there that people loved.”¹¹

This love from fans is also what defines genre expectations, as Miller defines genres directly in terms of their exigencies or the “socially objectified needs” that they fulfill and “as constituents of culture.”¹² The core pillars that Wilson discusses can also be defined in terms of genre and agency. His core pillars are “approachable, highly

⁸ Ibid.

⁹ Ibid.

¹⁰ Ibid.

¹¹ Ibid.

¹² Miller, “Genre in Ancient and Networked Media,” 180.

customizable, powerful heroes, well paced rewards, highly replayable, strong setting, and cooperative multiplayer.”¹³ He only has the time to cover the first four pillars in his talk, which involve configurative agency in terms of player customization and creating powerful heroes, further configurative agency in terms of the rewards offered, and temporal agency in terms of the pacing of said rewards. The approachability of the series has more to do with the appeal of the game to the largest audience by being as “easy to play” as possible.¹⁴ This refers far more to the controls than to the actual difficulty of gameplay, and, in this way, *Diablo III* was “easy to learn, impossible to master.”¹⁵

High replayability can refer to the spatial and explorative agency afforded through randomization of maps that was discussed at length in chapter one. It’s good that this remained a pillar for the third installment, and the continuation of procedurally generated content is an important genre convention for ARPGs. The strong setting has to do with, most likely, the aesthetics of the environments and the storyline as it relates to the franchise and is, thus, relevant to the design ethos, as Bódi defines design ethos also in terms of “what the aesthetics are of the games they produce over time.”¹⁶ Again, it is good to see that the setting was to remain consistent. Cooperative multiplayer, however, is an interesting choice for Wilson and his team to lean in on, as this begins the trend in the design ethos to focus on multiplayer content, which was more of a fun option afforded through Battle.net, rather than a core pillar for the gameplay itself, in the first

¹³ GDC, “South at the Devil: The Making of Diablo III.”

¹⁴ Ibid.

¹⁵ Ibid.

¹⁶ Bódi, *Videogames and Agency*, 3.

two games of the franchise. This trend becomes far more relevant in my discussion of the MMOARPG genre in chapter three.

These pillars also directly involve genre, both because they are responses to player expectations for another iteration in the franchise and another ARPG, but also because they involve the genre conventions of having randomized loot and maps as well as maintaining the fast-paced action that gives the ARPG the first letter of its acronym. The differences between the second and third game of the franchise seem to be too numerous and complicated to properly iterate without taking up far too much space in this project. To summarize, the third game overhauled many fans favorite systems like the skill trees, health and mana potions, and controls while also being the first to release on consoles after the PC release. Most important to note of these changes is that the switch from skill trees to choosing singular skills in a sequence greatly limited the configurative agency originally afforded by the customizability of the trees from the first two games. Also important is the choice to include, but not switch to, consoles as platforms. The release of the game on consoles happened after the original release on PC, and this allowed for the first players to experience *Diablo III* through the familiar UI and keyboard-based controls that they had become accustomed to with the franchise. Further, the conventions surrounding console gameplay did not deter fans—in fact, it seemed more enjoyable.

The game was wildly criticized upon release, especially with the two-day long horde of error codes that kept players from logging in and creating a character: “after a decade of turbulent development, *Diablo III* had finally gone live, but nobody could play

it.”¹⁷ The original game for PC still holds a user score of 4.2/10 on Metacritic.¹⁸ The console versions receive much better reviews, which could be attributed to many factors such as the use of a controller versus a keyboard, new demographics reached by including consoles in the first place, the user interface on a console versus a PC, etc. It is difficult to ascertain why the console versions consistently receive better ratings—even the PlayStation 3 version of basic *Diablo III* has a user score of 6.3/10.¹⁹ “After decades of clicking, many gamers almost felt sacrilegious saying so, but playing *Diablo III* was more fun with a PlayStation 4 controller than it ever had been with a mouse and keyboard.”²⁰ The trend towards new platforms does not stop at *III*, as *Diablo Immortal* makes the huge shift towards a mobile platform—though this shift does not bring in the same support from fans. Regardless, the fan reaction to *Diablo III* and its expansion was not quite as positive as it was for the previous two games in the series.

It is at this point that the *Diablo* franchise begins its nosedive, as the third installment was most definitely the most disliked of the series at the time of its release. As Jason Schreier says in his book, *Blood, Sweat, and Pixels*, “now, in 2012, the rocky launch of *Diablo III* had associated the Blizzard logo with something that the company had never experienced: public failure.”²¹ Jay Wilson is often blamed directly, and merely reading through the comments on his GDC video or scrolling through any *Diablo* related forums will reveal that the man is almost uniformly reviled by *Diablo* fans.²² This is

¹⁷ Jason Schreier, *Blood, Sweat, and Pixels: The Triumphant, Turbulent Stories Behind How Video Games Are Made* (Harper Collins, 2017), 87.

¹⁸ “Diablo III,” Metacritic, May 15, 2012, <https://www.metacritic.com/game/pc/diablo-iii>.

¹⁹ “Diablo III,” Metacritic, September 3, 2013, <https://www.metacritic.com/game/playstation-3/diablo-iii>.

²⁰ Schreier, *Blood, Sweat, and Pixel*, 110.

²¹ Schreier, *Blood, Sweat, and Pixels*, 90.

²² GDC, “Shout at the Devil: The Making of Diablo III.”

partly due to his being entirely new both to Blizzard and to the franchise when he was assigned as lead to *III*.²³ Taking a colossal amount of time in development, *Diablo III* released May 15th, 2012, with its expansion beginning development almost immediately. *Reaper of Souls*, *Diablo III*'s expansion, came out a year later and was intended to “fix” some of the major problems and bring back some of the more gothic tones that were lacking in the original game.²⁴ In essence, while it was easy to blame Wilson, the design ethos and franchise brand identity needed to be reestablished by returning some of the agency lost and reinvigorating the original aesthetic from the first two games. According to many reviews, the expansion did indeed redeem the game, some going so far as to say that “*Diablo III* has rediscovered the moment-to-moment gameplay that made the series great...and fixed—or removed—almost everything that got in the way of that greatness.”²⁵ There were two major issues with the game that needed fixing over time. The first was the complexity of the items.

Affixations are the extra statistics (or stats), such as health regeneration or chance to critically strike, that an item has in addition to the core stats like agility, strength, constitution, and so forth. *Diablo III* had an overwhelming number of affixations on their items, especially towards the endgame. Even Jay Wilson acknowledged that the mathematical skills required to understand which items were better than others was overkill for any standard player and readily admitted that this was a chief failing on the

²³ “Jay Wilson | Diablo Wiki | Fandom,” *Diablo Wiki*, n.d., https://diablo.fandom.com/wiki/Jay_Wilson#cite_ref-Leaves_4-4.

²⁴ “Diablo III: Reaper of Souls,” *Diablo Wiki*, n.d., https://diablo.fandom.com/wiki/Diablo_III:_Reaper_of_Souls.

²⁵ Schreier, *Blood, Sweat, and Pixels*, 109.

part of the development team.²⁶ This is the first core value of the series that *Diablo III* tainted—the items dropping as being a magnificent moment of both chance and reward for the player. This was a core element of the design ethos of the previous games, as looting was one of the focal points of gameplay for fans and the original development teams. When replacing an item requires players to consider a dozen or more percentages that directly affect their gameplay, we are no longer looking at the original awe of looting an upgrade. Figuring out if the item is an upgrade is its own process, complete with taxing considerations of which affixation a player wants to focus on over another—or worse, which combinations of affixations in addition to the core stats. This complexity also takes away from player agency as it greatly encumbers players by requiring rigorous mathematical skills to configure their avatars by way of upgrading equipment.

The loot system in general was flawed, as the most difficult play setting (Inferno) required the best gear to complete, which only dropped in the most difficult play setting, thus “creating a nasty, demonic version of the chicken-and-egg dilemma.”²⁷ One could not complete the content that dropped the gear required to complete the content. Players had one obvious option to get gear: the Auction House. The Auction House allowed players to buy and sell items for either gold, the currency used within the game itself, or real-world currencies in the PC version of the game. Jay Wilson and the rest of the team thought that the inclusion of the Auction House would allow players to participate in the trading of in-game items within the game itself in a way that many players had previously sought out black market opportunities for and even thought that the actual usage of the

²⁶ GDC, “Shout at the Devil: The Making of Diablo III.”

²⁷ Schreier, *Blood, Sweat, and Pixels*, 92.

service would be minimal at best.²⁸ Almost every player made a purchase on the Auction House, many of which did so with real currency.²⁹

This is the advent of pay-to-win mechanics in the franchise, as the gaining of items was now a matter of money rather than earning them through killing monsters and bosses: “the best way to beef up your character wasn’t to play the game and make fun decisions, but to type your credit card number into a form on Blizzard’s website.”³⁰ If players did not want to shell out real money for gear, they could smash pots to get a random chance at loot, and players now would “spend marathon sessions doing nothing but breaking pottery.”³¹ David Brevik and the Schaefer brothers had very clearly defined that the loot grind and the obtaining of cool, randomized, new items through killing monsters was one of the biggest pulls for replayability and enjoyment of the games. Without this, *Diablo III* was actively forsaking one of the core values of its predecessors. The Auction House went against the design ethos set up by the first two development teams, and it greatly transformed the franchise brand identity from one that included the loot grind to one that allowed for people with money to skip it entirely. This option to skip the grind also represents how *Diablo III*, in a rather backwards way, afforded great temporal agency to those with money while severely limiting it for those without. This separation of the haves and the have-nots gets repeated in *Diablo Immortal* by way of microtransactions and pay-to-win mechanics, as discussed in chapter three.

²⁸ GDC, “Shout at the Devil: The Making of Diablo III.”

²⁹ Ibid.

³⁰ Schreier, *Blood, Sweat, and Pixels*, 90.

³¹ Ibid., 93.

As it made “getting items too easy,” the Auction House was an instant regret for Blizzard’s team and eventually was shut down on March 18, 2014, at the suggestion of Josh Mosqueira, Jay Wilson’s replacement as game director and another new-to-Blizzard employee.³² Josh Mosqueira joined the *Diablo III* team in 2011 to head the console portion of development, the later far more successful set of releases, after a call with an old friend, Jay Wilson.³³ In addition to Loot 2.0, a system introduced in a patch just before the expansion that focused on “better loot drops, targeted loot drops, and giving players additional ways to customize their items,” the removal of the Auction House brought *Diablo III* closer to the original loot grind that fans loved.³⁴ One thing that Blizzard did with this game that they have always done was to listen to their fan feedback: “to collect and collate feedback on how to make the game better.”³⁵ This also allowed for greater adherence to social expectations and, thus, to the *Diablo* teams’ established design ethos and brand identity as well as to the genre conventions of a loot-grinding ARPG.

Josh Mosqueira makes the important distinction between player response to games as they are released and games as they are continuously updated when he states that “when gamers got wistful about *Diablo II*, they weren’t remembering the game’s original incarnation” and made it his sole focus to transform *Diablo III* into the game that sparks any current fond memories.³⁶ He blamed the original tanking of *III* on a

³² “Auction House,” Diablo Wiki, n.d., https://diablo.fandom.com/wiki/Auction_House.

³³ Schreier, *Blood, Sweat, and Pixels*, 91.

³⁴ “Loot 2.0,” Diablo Wiki, n.d., https://diablo.fandom.com/wiki/Loot_2.0.

³⁵ Schreier, *Blood, Sweat, and Pixels*, 94.

³⁶ *Ibid.*, 97.

development team that was “trying to live up to the legacy of this incredible game,” that game was *Diablo II*.³⁷ In this case, Mosqueira was referring to the design ethos and franchise brand identity that came along with the series and was pointing out the difficulties of continuing such a well-loved franchise without many of the original team—especially the major intellectual inputs of Brevik and the Schaefer brothers. Given that Mosqueira was developing the console versions alongside the expansion, he was given quite a lot of freedom to change whatever he saw fit, often overhauling whole systems to fit better with a controller instead of a keyboard. Mosqueira was the innovative mind behind the best parts of the game, which were, arguably, due to its expansion and its invasion into console gaming. Unfortunately, Mosqueira left Blizzard in 2016 to form a new studio called Bonfire.³⁸ With all the eventual changes, *Diablo III* was able to bring back their fanbase from the precipice of loathing and deliver a game that became well received and proved that “every game can be fixed” and “years can pass before that game properly coalesces.”³⁹

So, despite *III*'s initial failure, the franchise maintained popularity over time and was able to fit well into the design ethos and franchise brand identity established by the first two games. This does not render the failure nonexistent, however, and fans remember the error codes, auction house, and poorly designed items to this day.⁴⁰ This

³⁷ Ibid., 98.

³⁸ Ibid., 110.

³⁹ Ibid., 111.

⁴⁰ For more recent discussions of these errors, see the likes of Schreier's chapter on *Diablo III* in *Blood, Sweat, and Pixels*; Eriflee, “Reddit - Dive into Anything,” n.d., https://www.reddit.com/r/Diablo/comments/qqjq4y/diablo_3s_first_month_of_release_after_error_37/; Bogdan Robert Mateş, “Diablo 3 Error 37 - What Does It Mean and Can It Be | GameWatcher,” n.d., <https://www.gamewatcher.com/news/diablo-3-error-37/>; SkinnyBill, “Error 37,” Know Your Meme, April 12, 2023, <https://knowyourmeme.com/memes/error-37>.

dip in fans' trust and support of the games highlights one of the early moments wherein Blizzard was rather blind to their fans' wants and had to do some serious backpedaling to rectify the issues involved. Later, with the unveiling of *Diablo Immortal*, we are introduced to another moment when Blizzard clearly misunderstands their fans and reveals a game that no one seems to want. Meanwhile, in the time between fixing *III* and unveiling *Immortal*, the company went through several scandals that embroiled them in legal battles and controversy worthy of exploring here in this project. These kinds of behind-the-scenes insights can help enlighten us as to what sort of company was responsible for and would dare to make a game that so clearly takes advantage of its player base—*Diablo Immortal*. Thus, we begin our examination of the professional ethos of the company Activision Blizzard and its effects on their loyal fanbase.

Lawsuits and NetEase

The culture among gamers has long since been deemed problematic in terms of misogyny and bigotry, but what of the culture within the industry itself? Is the same true of the offices of those who work to bring us the games that we love? In the case of Activision Blizzard, it was—so much so that the California Department of Fair Employment and Housing (DFEH) filed a state legal complaint against the company on July 20th, 2021 after two years of investigation for perpetuating a "frat boy culture."⁴¹ Most troubling is that the original allegations were centered around events that had occurred in 2013, regarding a "Cosby Suite" at BlizzCon 2013 wherein debaucherous

⁴¹ Adam Bankhurst, "Activision Blizzard Lawsuit Timeline: The Story So Far - IGN," *IGN*, April 26, 2023, <https://www.ign.com/articles/activision-blizzard-lawsuit-timeline-the-story-so-far>.

behavior ensued and men had chat groups centered around having sex with women and making inappropriate sexual jokes.⁴² Some of the employees involved were terminated in 2020, while some continued to work at Blizzard.⁴³

The lawsuit also alleged that the company's culture subjected its female employees to unequal pay and added sexual harassment. The DFEH also called out Activision Blizzard for having exclusively white, male leadership roles and Presidents with very few women reaching any top role in the company, and those that do reach those roles "earn less salary, incentive pay and total compensation than their male peers" and that "similar disparities exist throughout the company."⁴⁴ Further, DFEH found that often there were no repercussions for any reported actions and that the HR department was not trusted or held in any high regard by employees with some "human resource personnel...known to be close to alleged harassers."⁴⁵ The allegations are deeply concerning regarding the culture within the company, though I could hardly say, as a female gamer who has had plenty of experience with this exact kind of disgusting behavior, that I was shocked to find out that this was occurring within one of the biggest companies in the video game industry.

The level of inequality and harassment within the company sheds some light on the kind of people that are making games like those in the *Diablo* franchise. They are not taking diverse opinions and input into account, and, as a result, could be projecting that

⁴² Ethan Gach, "Inside Blizzard Developers' Infamous Bill 'Cosby Suite,'" *Kotaku*, July 29, 2021, <https://kotaku.com/inside-blizzard-developers-infamous-bill-cosby-suite-1847378762>.

⁴³ Bankhurst, "Activision Blizzard Lawsuit Timeline: The Story So Far – IGN."

⁴⁴ "Civil Rights and Equal Pay Act Complaint for Injunctive and Monetary Relief and Damages," <https://aboutblaw.com/YJw> (Department of Fair Employment and Housing, July 20, 2021), accessed September 18, 2023.

⁴⁵ *Ibid.*

same mentality into the development of games that may also ignore huge demographics of their fans. It is no secret that the fanbase is filled with “increasingly diverse players,” as DFEH points out in their legal complaint.⁴⁶ How are these players being represented and catered to within the development process if the people behind said development are embroiled in legal battles involving a male-centric, sexist environment and culture? The answer is not readily available, but it is safe to assume that a company with these kinds of issues may not be the best at creating games meant to appeal to a diverse audience.

While some fans are begging for the games to be kept the same, others are asking for an increased appeal to this more diverse audience. How a company attempts to balance between these competing fanbases is tricky, but *Immortal* seems to disappoint both by not only changing too much of the original design ethos for the franchise but also by not diversifying its character creation enough. This is evidenced by *Diablo Immortal*'s lack of skin tone varieties in its character creation. There are few options for darker skin tones, and these only exist for a few of the classes. This greatly limits configurative player agency or the ability for players to customize their avatars to look however they want. There also aren't many people of color represented in the storyline throughout the game, though women are often featured in positions of power. While the plot includes these female figures, the actual players in the game are not as lucky when faced with the chatrooms that are filled with a similar “frat boy culture” of male players harassing female players regularly. The culture behind the company is reflected during gameplay

⁴⁶ Ibid.

through these chatrooms, even if the game attempts to position women as equals in the storyline.

One day following the filing of DFEH’s complaint, Activision Blizzard released a statement in response to the lawsuit. The statement discusses how DFEH misrepresented the company and focused too much on past events, stating that DFEH refused to work with executives at Activision Blizzard prior to turning to litigations and pointing out just how much the company had done in recent years to remedy its cultural concerns.⁴⁷ Given that these issues were now incredibly public rather than private, fans were noticeably outraged at the realization that one of their favorite production studios housed this kind of behavior. Two major emails were sent out to employees by J. Allen Brack, President of Blizzard, and Fran Townsend, Activision Blizzard executive, on July 22nd, 2021, two days following the filing. Brack’s email, sent to all staff, mirrors fan disgust and supreme concern for how to move forward in the company, while Townsend’s email seems to reiterate what the official statement from the company said—that DFEH is not representing the company as it currently exists.⁴⁸ Townsend also “tweeted out an article that discusses the problem with whistleblowing” during this time, which has since been deleted.⁴⁹ These two responses show how radically different the reactions within the company were to allegations—some were appalled while others got defensive. Defensiveness does not lead me to believe that everything that can be done is being actively done to eliminate these kinds of biases within the games developed.

⁴⁷ Bankhurst, “Activision Blizzard Lawsuit Timeline: The Story So Far – IGN.”

⁴⁸ Ibid.

⁴⁹ Ibid.

During this time, former Blizzard Executives also reached out with their remorse for not having stopped this behavior sooner. Ex-CEO and co-founder of Blizzard Mike Morhaime apologized for having failed the women of Blizzard in the past, while former executive Chris Metzen apologized for any part that he played in a “culture that fostered harassment, inequality, and indifference.”⁵⁰ Jeff Hamilton, *World of Warcraft* senior system designer, not only shared his thoughts on the disgusting nature of the company’s response to the lawsuit but also made the very important point that this experience “is currently taking a group of world-class developers and making them so mad and traumatized they’re rendered unable to keep making a great game” as “almost no work is being done on World of Warcraft right now while this obscenity plays out.”⁵¹ This lawsuit triggered a company-wide reaction that directly affected the productivity and motivation of thousands of employees—most likely including those working on all games, not just *World of Warcraft*. Given that *Diablo Immortal* did not come out until June of 2022, one can assume that similar halts were made in that production as well. These kinds of halts, especially with the high employee turnover that follows, can greatly disrupt a game’s development and have a direct impact on the finished product as well as the timeline for a game’s release. As *Immortal*’s release date was pushed back several times, I wonder how much of that had to do with the early effects of legal issues like these.

⁵⁰ Ibid.

⁵¹ Ibid.

Employees began to organize a walkout after drafting and signing a letter that declared the company's response to the lawsuit as "abhorrent and insulting."⁵² Over 2,000 employees had signed that letter, comprising over twenty percent of the company's total employees.⁵³ The goal for the walkout was to "improve conditions for employees at the company, especially women, and in particular women of color and transgender women, nonbinary people, and other marginalized groups."⁵⁴ They also demanded all information regarding employee compensation, promotion rates, and salary ranges and that "the company's leadership, hierarchy, and HR department" be audited by a third party.⁵⁵ The letter states that the employees "no longer trust that our leaders will place employee safety above their own interests."⁵⁶ Overall, it was clear that a large contingency of Activision Blizzard's internal crew, probably including *Diablo Immortal* team members, was shaken and wanted immediate actions taken by their leadership to invest in employee comfort, safety, and equality. The professional ethos of the company, both internally and externally, was drastically taking a downturn. On the day that the walkout was announced, Activision Blizzard CEO Bobby Kotick backpedaled on the original company statement and promised that the company would be "investigating every claim of harassment while offering listening sessions and evaluating managers"

⁵² Eric Van Allen, "Activision Blizzard Employees Sign Letter Declaring Leadership's Response to Lawsuit 'Abhorrent and Insulting'," *Destructoid*, July 26, 2021, <https://www.destructoid.com/activision-blizzard-employees-sign-letter-report-news/>.

⁵³ Matt Kim, "Activision Blizzard Employees Sign Open Letter Criticizing Company's Official Response to Lawsuit - IGN," *IGN*, July 27, 2021, <https://www.ign.com/articles/activision-blizzard-open-letter-discrimination-lawsuit>.

⁵⁴ Eric Van Allen, "Activision Blizzard Employees Plan Walkout Following Lawsuit," *Destructoid*, July 27, 2021, <https://www.destructoid.com/activision-blizzard-walkout-planned-lawsuit-news/>.

⁵⁵ *Ibid.*

⁵⁶ Patrick Klepek, "Activision Blizzard Employees Say They Don't Trust the Company to Keep Them Safe," *Vice*, July 26, 2021, <https://www.vice.com/en/article/akgy9g/activision-blizzard-employees-say-they-dont-trust-the-company-to-keep-them-safe>.

and pledging “to add resources to ensure that Activision Blizzard’s hiring practices are more diverse.”⁵⁷ Blizzard also confirmed that it would give employees paid time off during participation in the walkout.⁵⁸

Considering the protest at Activision Blizzard, Ubisoft employees signed their own open letter that both claimed solidarity with those at Activision Blizzard and demanded Ubisoft step up their game regarding sexual harassment claims.⁵⁹ Even Activision Blizzard’s walkout was inspired by a similar protest in 2019 at Riot Games following the same kinds of sexual harassment allegations.⁶⁰ To put it broadly, the industry as a whole was undergoing massive upheavals due to the “frat boy” culture and misogynistic practices across the board. Many employees found themselves caught up in protesting and advocating rather than developing games, and this also fed into a lot of employee turnover in the aftermath of the lawsuit—both of those the allegations were directed towards as well as those the allegations were meant to protect.

Executives shift around quite a bit in the year prior to *Diablo Immortal*’s release, forcing us to question just how stable leadership must have been in the months leading up to it. On August 3rd, 2021, Blizzard president J. Allen Brack stepped down and was replaced by co-leaders Jen Oneal and Mike Ybarra.⁶¹ Just a few days later, on August 11th, 2021, three senior developers left: “Diablo 4 director Luis Barriga, lead level designer Jesse McCree, and World of Warcraft designer Jonathan LeCraft.”⁶² Brack,

⁵⁷ Bankhurst, “Activision Blizzard Lawsuit Timeline: The Story So Far – IGN.”

⁵⁸ Ibid.

⁵⁹ Ibid.

⁶⁰ Van Allen, “Activision Blizzard Employees Sign Letter Declaring Leadership’s Response to Lawsuit ‘Abhorrent and Insulting’.”

⁶¹ Bankhurst, “Activision Blizzard Lawsuit Timeline: The Story So Far – IGN.”

⁶² Ibid.

McCree, and LeCraft all had allegations of sexual harassment or sexually inappropriate behavior leveled against them. On September 14th, 2021, Activision Blizzard hired Julie Hodges, former Walt Disney Company senior vice president of corporate HR, compensation, benefits, and talent acquisition, to help reshape corporate culture and regain the trust of their shareholders and fans.⁶³ Given the overall disgust with Activision Blizzard as exemplified by comments from fans like RoLLiTiMe, BumfaceNZ, and nindie-yo in 2021 on IGN reporter Adam Bankhurst’s article concerning the timeline of these lawsuits, it is safe to say that this hire did not work as planned and that fans still distrust the company.⁶⁴

Also on August 11th, 2021, the ABK Workers Alliance, “with the support of the Communication Workers of America guild (CWA), have filed an unfair labor practice suit with the National Labor Relations Board (NLRB) alleging the company has engaged in union-busting and intimidation of workers.”⁶⁵ Later in the month, on September 20th, 2021, the Securities and Exchange Commission (SEC) began its own investigation for “how the company handled allegations of sexual misconduct and workplace discrimination.”⁶⁶ This is all during yet another investigation that had been ongoing from the Equal Employment Opportunity Commission (EEOC)—also regarding the company’s cases of harassment. With all these legal issues happening simultaneously, Blizzard’s Chief Legal Officer and Overwatch Executive Producer leave the company on the 21st of

⁶³ Ibid.

⁶⁴ Ibid.

⁶⁵ Ibid.

⁶⁶ Ibid.

September 2021.⁶⁷ The EEOC lawsuit was settled for a whopping \$18 Million dollar fund for employees on September 27th, 2021.⁶⁸

In October, the DFEH found issue with this settlement, as it could cause severe harm to its own lawsuit and possibly lead “to the ‘effective destruction’ of evidence critical to its case.”⁶⁹ In response, the EEOC revealed the juicy detail that two of DFEH’s attorneys had already worked on the EEOC case against Activision Blizzard previously and were now under conflict of interest and are “a product of prohibited representation” which would undermine the entire DFEH suit.⁷⁰ This controversy held up the settlement until March 29th, 2022.⁷¹ There are currently no updates on the DFEH case. It should be obvious, but all this legal trouble does not yield the most productive of crews nor does the content of the lawsuits bode well for the cultural background behind games like *Diablo Immortal*. This is the environment within which that game was shaped, which should bring into question the way in which the culture of the publishing company influences or perpetuates the culture of the player base. I’m inclined to see the rampant sexual harassment that occurs within the chatrooms of *Immortal*, as well as the general lack of chat moderation, as echoes or extensions of this culture—something that cannot sit well with a diverse fanbase. Further, these public legal battles greatly tarnish the

⁶⁷ Ibid.

⁶⁸ Kat Bailey, “Activision Blizzard Settles U.S. Equal Opportunity Commission Lawsuit for \$18 Million - IGN,” *IGN*, September 27, 2021, <https://www.ign.com/articles/activision-blizzard-lawsuit-equal-opportunity-commission>.

⁶⁹ Rich Stanton, “Activision-Blizzard Lawsuits in Chaos as Federal Agency Accuses California’s DFEH of Ethics Violations,” *Pcgamer*, October 11, 2021, <https://www.pcgamer.com/activision-blizzard-lawsuits-in-chaos-as-federal-agency-accuses-californias-dfeh-of-ethics-violations/>.

⁷⁰ Ibid.

⁷¹ Bankhurst, “Activision Blizzard Lawsuit Timeline: The Story So Far – IGN.”

professional ethos of the studio, forcing fans to consider where they spend money on future game releases and who they support with their fandom and gameplay.

If a company can take advantage of their employees, how do they treat their customers? In the case of Activision Blizzard, they are okay with shamelessly taking money for legally questionable transactions within their mobile games. Other important legal action being taken against the company directly involves the business model and pay mechanics included in *Diablo Immortal*. In early May 2022, an Arizona parent filed a lawsuit against Blizzard for its card packs in the game *Hearthstone*.⁷² The complaint claims that the game does little or nothing to show players what chances they have of getting rare or valuable cards in these packs that are available for purchase with real-world currency while also claiming that the game is deceiving players, “particularly minors,” into making purchases with no option of a refund.⁷³ One of the more important focal points of the complaint is that it takes into account the status of many players as minors, targeting the game’s lack of “parental control features.”⁷⁴ There is no current update on this class action. This shady kind of transaction history and lack of care for the ages of their players can be seen in *Diablo Immortal* also.

Much like in *Hearthstone*, *Diablo Immortal* features purchasable items that grant a random loot option, exactly like loot boxes, to be discussed further in chapter three. Loot boxes are a hot button issue within the gaming community. They usually refer to purchasable items that grant randomized loot to players—often ranging from poor to

⁷² Nicole Carpenter, “Hearthstone Developer Blizzard Entertainment Facing Class Action Suit,” *Polygon*, May 18, 2022, <https://www.polygon.com/23123218/hearthstone-card-packs-class-action-lawsuit-blizzard-entertainment>.

⁷³ *Ibid.*

⁷⁴ *Ibid.*

excellent quality. The purchase of them is often seen as a form of gambling, especially when they can be purchased directly with real-world money, that has been litigated consistently and by the U.S. Federal Trade Commission (FTC). The *Hearthstone* lawsuit is also not the first of its kind for the company, as loot boxes were the topic of another lawsuit involving *Overwatch* which Blizzard settled out of court.⁷⁵ *Diablo Immortal* is currently under investigation from a class action specialty firm, Migliaccio & Rathod, involving an in-game gem that was purchasable with real-world currency which had misleading descriptions.⁷⁶ This has the potential for a class action lawsuit, and there is currently a class action lawsuit being leveled at Blizzard that is still accepting claims⁷⁷ for both *Hearthstone* and *Diablo Immortal* purchasing by the firm Labaton Sucharow.⁷⁸

With these legal battles in mind, I can safely say that Blizzard Entertainment seems to have few, if any, ethical concerns regarding the business models for its games' purchasable content. The company also clearly has a history of not only utilizing a mobile platform's expected microtransactions but also in-game purchases that directly affect gameplay—a kind of purchase that is often frowned upon. Their other large mobile game, *Hearthstone*, had its own lawsuits far before *Diablo Immortal* came out. It is not surprising that they have repeated the same kind of unsavory and predatory purchase options behind the guise of purchasing in-game currency rather than “loot boxes” proper in this newer mobile game. This also accounts for fan reactions to the announcement that

⁷⁵ Maeve Allsup, “Blizzard Wins Bid to Keep *Overwatch* ‘Loot Box’ Suit Out of Court,” *Bloomberg Law*, March 30, 2022, <https://news.bloomberglaw.com/us-law-week/blizzard-wins-bid-to-keep-overwatch-loot-box-suit-out-of-court>.

⁷⁶ Nicole Carpenter, “*Diablo Immortal* Faces Legal Inquiry over a ‘Misleading’ Legendary Gem,” *Polygon*, January 18, 2023, <https://www.polygon.com/23560629/diablo-immortal-lawsuit-class-action-blessing-of-the-worthy-gem>.

⁷⁷ As of September 25th, 2023.

⁷⁸ “Blizzard - Lantern,” n.d., <https://lantern.labaton.com/case/blizzard>.

Diablo Immortal was to be a mobile-exclusive game at BlizzCon 2018, to be discussed later in this chapter. These social expectations help define why the mobile game genre is not a popular one, especially when considering the original ARPG genre, franchise brand identity, and design ethos of the first three *Diablo* games. Also of great importance, while *Hearthstone* was only developed by Blizzard Entertainment, *Diablo Immortal* had another company, for the first time in the franchise and as a very rare occurrence for the company, that co-developed the game. NetEase Games, a division of NetEase, Inc., was the other party involved in the entire development of *Diablo Immortal*, even though the game is not listed on their website's game portfolio.⁷⁹

This lack of claiming the title could be due to the end of a fourteen-year-long licensing partnership between Blizzard Entertainment, Inc. and NetEase, Inc., wherein many major titles like *World of Warcraft* and *Diablo III* will no longer be available in China.⁸⁰ It seems odd that they don't include the game in their portfolio, as "Diablo Immortal co-development and publishing is covered under a separate agreement between the two companies."⁸¹ There's no telling why *Diablo Immortal* is missing from their portfolio, but it does make one wonder what is going on there. In order to understand the design ethos of this new company, we must consider that NetEase, Inc. is an internet and game services provider, specializing in "the most popular and longest running mobile and PC games available in China and globally."⁸² In addition to games, NetEase also runs

⁷⁹ 网易, NetEase Inc., "NetEase Games," n.d., <http://www.neteasegames.com/game/hot/>.

⁸⁰ Andrew Reynolds, "Blizzard Entertainment and NetEase Suspending Game Services in China," Activision Blizzard, November 16, 2022, <https://investor.activision.com/news-releases/news-release-details/blizzard-entertainment-and-netease-suspending-game-services>.

⁸¹ Ibid.

⁸² "Investor Relations Home | NetEase, Inc.," NetEase, Inc., n.d., <https://ir.netease.com/>.

some e-commerce websites, its own music streaming platform, and advertising services.⁸³ This company is huge, and with its focus on mobile gaming, it makes sense that *Diablo Immortal* features so much predatory purchasable content. As Jason Schreier points out in his book, *Press Reset: Ruin and Recovery in the Video Game Industry*, companies were well aware of just how predatory they were being in their mobile game design and “some of the studios behind these ‘freemium’ mobile games even hired psychologists to try to figure out the best way to keep players addicted.”⁸⁴ It is a staple of the genre, and larger companies that crank out games for this platform tend not to care about the quality of the gameplay. NetEase is no exception, and their design ethos is one of including these kinds of predatory content in their games.

BlizzCon 2018

While the lawsuits discussed earlier were all after the announcement of *Diablo Immortal* in 2018, the inclusion of NetEase as co-developer was revealed at the same time as the game was. Both announcements occurred at BlizzCon in 2018, and fans were clamoring for new information regarding the *Diablo* franchise. Just imagine—the hallway is packed, and a mass of people are each trying to press their way to the front of the crowd that’s flooding through the large entrances to the ballroom. Bodies closely packed together filter into the huge space to find a seat, filling the room to capacity. It is dimly lit, with blue stage lights sweeping over the crowd, illuminating the eager faces of the pungent fans filling the seats. The screens behind the stage read *BlizzCon* while one

⁸³ Ibid.

⁸⁴ Jason Schreier, *Press Reset: Ruin and Recovery in the Video Game Industry* (Grand Central Publishing, 2021), 239.

shows previews of up-and-coming games from Blizzard Entertainment. In 2018, six years following the release of *Diablo III*, these fans were gathered in a giant ballroom awaiting the announcement of the next *Diablo* release. The blue lights switched to red as Wyatt Cheng, the lead designer of the *Diablo* team at Blizzard at the time, was brought to the stage. Decked out in a *Diablo* t-shirt, Wyatt looked ready to deliver the most exciting news.

He greets the audience, which receives a loud cheer, and then exclaims, “we love *Diablo!*”⁸⁵ This, too, is met with crowd enthusiasm. However, when he then begins to discuss a mobile platform, the crowd grows eerily silent, with only scattered applause and subpar cheering. The presentation for *Diablo Immortal* itself took all of eleven minutes—over half of which was taken up by a cinematic trailer and a gameplay demo. What Wyatt repeatedly talked about in the scant few moments that he did was that the game would be on a mobile platform. Every time this is mentioned, the crowd has only a handful of rejoicing fans with the vast majority remaining rather quiet.⁸⁶ Cheng tells the crowd that he will be back on the stage in a little bit for more information regarding the game. It quickly became obvious that fans were expecting a *Diablo IV* announcement instead of a game set between the events of *II* and *III*, as fans struggled to applaud Cheng upon his leaving the stage.⁸⁷

Wyatt Cheng began his Q&A panel with a calming reminder that Blizzard had multiple *Diablo* projects in the works, essentially promising that this game was not the

⁸⁵ Angry Roleplayer, “Diablo ‘Immortal’ Announced by Wyatt Cheng at Blizzcon 2018,” November 5, 2018, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=QmUcQWUJHYs>.

⁸⁶ Ibid.

⁸⁷ Ibid.

only one in the franchise to come out soon.⁸⁸ This reminder inadvertently did something rather important: it let fans know that *Diablo Immortal* was not the game that the development team knew fans wanted. It was a pacifying gesture that came across as a reminder that the “real” game was still coming and not to worry. The idea that a mobile game is not a “real” game is one that has been circling the gaming community for quite some time.⁸⁹ As Stacey Henley puts it in their 2021 article for TheGamer, “the gaming community at large has always kept mobile gaming at arm’s length...the mobile space is still laden with the tag of being just for casuals, or of being less than its console and PC counterparts.”⁹⁰ While patently false, it still holds some weight in forums and among the elitist gamers that would claim that anything not on a PC or console is for children or people that could not call themselves true gamers. I, considering myself a gamer, do not share this view, but the questioners in line at the *Diablo Immortal* Q&A panel and the fans surrounding them seemed to.

There are two major Q&A moments to note here from the day one Q&A panel. First, a fan asks if there are “any plans to make this playable on PC or is this strictly mobile forever?”⁹¹ To this, Cheng responds that there are currently no plans to make a PC version of *Diablo Immortal*, and the crowd’s boo is almost deafening.⁹² The second

⁸⁸ Angry Roleplayer, “Diablo ‘Immortal’ Q&A with Wyatt Cheng & Matthew Berger (Senior Designer) at Blizzcon 2018,” November 5, 2018, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=s06DMJF6F20>.

⁸⁹ See Stacey Henley, “Three Mobile Gaming Devs Discuss Whether Mobile Games Are ‘Real’ Games,” TheGamer, May 16, 2021, <https://www.thegamer.com/best-mobile-gaming-devs-real-games/>; Pjheric, “Reddit - Dive into Anything,” n.d., https://www.reddit.com/r/truегaming/comments/g5ij95/where_does_the_whole_mobile_gaming_is_not_real/.

⁹⁰ Henley, “Three Mobile Gaming Devs Discuss Whether Mobile Games Are ‘Real’ Games.”

⁹¹ Forte Capital Management, “Diablo Immortal Full QnA Lul,” November 3, 2018, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=K_XBvg7Lw2k.

⁹² Ibid.

moment is when a fan asks if this announcement for a new mobile *Diablo* game is, in fact, an “out of season April Fool’s joke.”⁹³ Both of these questions and their answers became infamous for the community surrounding the franchise. For the first question, it is important to acknowledge that the developers of *Diablo Immortal* did eventually realize the rampant dissent to a mobile-exclusive title and came out with a PC version in beta at the time of *Immortal’s* release. Announced on April 25th, 2022, less than two months prior to the release of the game, Blizzard stated that they “took to heart” the “desire to play Immortal on PC” and that they were “most pleased to announce that this has been made a reality” in that “Diablo Immortal will also be free-to-play for Windows PC upon launch in Open Beta.”⁹⁴

However, the PC version is, without a doubt, horrible compared to the mobile version. This is because the PC version is essentially a copy of the mobile game, complete with the same user interface and incredibly simplified controls. Note that the release announcement is for the Open Beta at time of the mobile release—their release of a PC version was incredibly last minute. It is obvious that this game was always intended for mobile only, and we have the early decision of that exemplified in this BlizzCon 2018 Q&A panel response. Their announcements of the PC version also support this as the studio states that “Diablo Immortal was build for mobile first” and “Diablo Immortal on PC is an experiment from Blizzard,” while also reminding us that “if you’re a longtime

⁹³ Ibid.

⁹⁴ Blizzard Entertainment, “Diablo® Immortal™: A New Plane Of Hell Opens For Mobile And PC On June 2,” April 25, 2022, <https://news.blizzard.com/en-us/diablo-immortal/23787371/diablo-immortal-a-new-plane-of-hell-opens-for-mobile-and-pc-on-june-2>.

Diablo player, the result will feel a little different from other PC Diablo games.”⁹⁵ The rhetoric here is definitely meant to cover them should the fans expect another iteration in the series similar to those in the past.

So, why am I bringing up this fan reaction? Fans were not in support of the choice to move to a mobile platform from the very first announcement of that choice. As Schreier points out in his examination of another franchise that a studio released a mobile version of, “what set people off most wasn’t that EA and Mythic had made a microtransaction packed phone game, but that the two companies seemed to be exploiting a beloved old franchise” and that “a game like this would have been most appealing to gamers who played primarily on phones...yet it had the skin of a game adored by hard-core PC gamers.”⁹⁶ Mobile games, like any genre, have social expectations or conventions that many fans were initially worried about. Not only is there the long-standing PC-only fanbase that tends to view casual, mobile titles as lesser to the more-often-considered serious games for PC and consoles, but also mobile games are known for their microtransactions and pay-to-win mechanics.

Conclusion

People see that the next installment in their beloved franchise is going mobile-exclusive and immediately assume the worst for its mechanics and paid content. Fans were so upset, in fact, that “in the hours since the Diablo YouTube channel uploaded the reveal trailers, fans ha[d] already downvoted it 26,000 times. That compares to just 1,000

⁹⁵ Blizzard Entertainment, “Making Diablo Immortal For PC,” April 25, 2022, <https://news.blizzard.com/en-us/diablo-immortal/23797159/making-diablo-immortal-for-pc>.

⁹⁶ Schreier, *Press Reset: Ruin and Recovery in the Video Game Industry*, 245-46.

upvotes.”⁹⁷ Notably, “while downvotes on a video have, at best, a tenuous connection to any real-world behaviors, this is one way that fans have attempted to show their discontent with games in the past.”⁹⁸ Similarly, Schreier discusses fan outrage to a mobile release for a loyal PC fanbase as having “quietly accumulated a small audience of fans who didn’t care about the timers, but the internet outrage was deafening.”⁹⁹ So, while *Diablo Immortal* has its own small fanbase, the reaction of the already existing one is incredibly important for the design ethos, franchise brand identity, and the ARPG genre, as it directly relates to what was already established by the first three installments in the series.

Because Miller defines genre through social action and the relationship between culture and author, I find it important to point out this hyper-negative reaction to the game’s initial announcement. The author, in this case, is Activision Blizzard, while the culture concerned with this announcement is exactly the kind of person who would attend BlizzCon. The fans of the studio, those that are diehard fans of the games produced by Activision Blizzard specifically, are the ones in the audience of the BlizzCon announcement. More specifically, fans of the *Diablo* franchise would be particularly interested in this announcement as the franchise title was included in the title of the presentation on schedules for the whole convention. They are the exact audience for which the game is being produced. It is important to note their social expectations as these define the genre according to Miller’s theory. The fact that they were so negative in

⁹⁷ Jeff Grubb, “Diablo: Immortal Team Fends off Fan Backlash at BlizzCon,” VentureBeat, November 2, 2018, <https://venturebeat.com/pc-gaming/diablo-immortal-team-fends-off-fan-backlash-at-blizzcon/>.

⁹⁸ Ibid.

⁹⁹ Schreier, *Press Reset: Ruin and Recovery in the Video Game Industry*, 246.

their response only proves just how far off the game was going to be in fulfilling its genre expectations in the franchise. This is the tone set for the game's release, and the company's ethos, as demonstrated by my discussions of their very public and super unsavory legal battles, only made this tone sourer.

This chapter began by tracing the third, and much less successful, installment in the franchise. This began the downward turn that started to define the failures of the studio. Jay Wilson, the lead designer for *Diablo III*, even admitted that some of their design choices went against the core values, or design ethos, for the original two titles. I also took the time to apply Bòdi's player agency heuristic to this third game as well, focusing on how genre conventions that were deviated from greatly reduced agency afforded to players who could not afford to spend money on items in the Auction House and to players who did not have the time to perform advanced mathematics to determine which items would upgrade their characters. My discussion outlined how the third installment deviated from genre conventions and eventually released updates and an expansion pack that brought the game closer to its franchise brand identity. Ultimately, there were design choices made that re-established the game as part of the *Diablo* series in the eyes of its fandom and brought the development team behind the game closer to previous teams' design ethos.

I then took the time to look at the professional ethos of the studio, paying special attention to the legal battles that defined how the studio was viewed through a public lens prior to the release of *Diablo Immortal*. These included a slew of sexual harassment cases that very negatively impacted the view of the culture of the whole studio and cases against the studio for its use of predatory paid content in its other major mobile game,

Hearthstone. All these legal cases defined part of the design ethos for Activision Blizzard in that they helped define the character of the studio behind-the-scenes and in their design choices regarding the mobile game genre. Again, we can see how genre relates directly to design choice here insofar as including certain paid content constitutes an important choice of which mobile game genre conventions a studio wants to include in its design.

Activision Blizzard, as is exemplified through its legal struggles surrounding *Hearthstone*, clearly has no reserves in including more nefarious, predatory microtransactions in its iterations of the mobile game. After examining these legal cases, I looked to the inclusion of NetEase as co-developer for *Diablo Immortal*, as this inclusion of a different studio entirely drags along with it a new design ethos to consider. Given that NetEase is known for the same kind of predatory content in its mobile games, this choice of co-developer also does not bode well for the series and only adds to the already questionable design ethos behind *Diablo Immortal*. I ended the chapter with a look at how the announcement for *Immortal* was received at their 2018 BlizzCon event. The reaction showed the negative opinions of the studio and the choice to come out with a mobile-exclusive title in real-time and set the tone for expectations of the game upon release.

CHAPTER III:

THE GAME

I was sitting alone on my porch, watching a small download bar fill up slowly on my phone screen. I could remember the dismay that I had felt when I found out that this game was coming out on a mobile platform instead of computers and consoles as the previous three titles had. As I sat there, I reminisced about the different iterations of sitting at a desk and playing a *Diablo* game—from my parent’s basement to my own bedroom. Now I was alone, sitting outside, staring at a tiny screen. It felt so different—so wrong. Where was the camaraderie? Where was my battle station? I heard that there was going to be a PC version, but the mobile game was the focus for the company. So, I was determined to see what it was like to play the series on this platform. After the game had downloaded, I made my character and plunged into the dark, ominous world of *Diablo* once more. I liked what I initially experienced, but I was still physically, viscerally aware of how different it felt to play with my seat on the steps, the night air on my skin, and a battery life on my device to worry about. The worries about mobile games and microtransactions still swam in the ether of my thoughts as I played, and I was still remembering my own disappointment that lingered from the original 2018 announcement of the game that I was finally playing—alone on a phone.

Popular game news website Polygon interviewed Allen Adham, executive producer and co-founder of Blizzard, in the wake of the *Diablo Immortal* announcement backlash. In addition to reiterating that they have multiple *Diablo* projects in the works, Adham points out that, particularly for younger people, “mobile is their primary gaming

device” and that they’ve “been making games on many different platforms...so to us, this is another gaming platform.”¹ The new audience that would be awarded for bringing the franchise to this platform involves “hundreds of millions of people who play games every day on their mobile device.”² Note how the focus of these responses is on the platform being popular and not on the franchise or the fan response to the title’s announcement. When Adham does address the negativity, he skirts the issue by saying that anyone who “holds it and plays it feels great about it” and that “what those folks are really saying is they desperately, passionately want the next big thing.”³ This is just fundamentally missing the point that fans are concerned for a mobile version of a game that they love. He does note that they were dealing with a “very passionate desktop PC and console audience” and compares the *Immortal* announcement with the *Hearthstone* announcement, wherein fans were “unsure of what to expect from a digital card game given our history of making other game types.”⁴ However, this ignores some of the primary concerns of the fanbase, and Adham’s responses do not seem to address the true concerns involving the mobile game as a genre itself.

Even Ben Kuchera, reporter for Polygon, in his response to this interview with Adham and argument that Blizzard is fundamentally forsaking its fanbase, misses the point of genre. In his article, “Diablo: Immortal broke the unspoken rules of Blizzard, and BlizzCon,” Kuchera focuses on how Blizzard “doesn’t need to get to a genre first, it just

¹ Michael McWhertor, “Blizzard Responds to Diablo: Immortal Backlash from Fans,” *Polygon*, November 3, 2018, <https://www.polygon.com/blizzcon/2018/11/3/18059222/diablo-immortal-blizzard-response-blizzcon>.

² Ibid.

³ Ibid.

⁴ Ibid.

needs to be able to do it *better*.”⁵ While this is true for most of Blizzard’s major titles, in the case of the *Diablo* franchise, he is wrong. Blizzard famously created the ARPG genre with the first installment and set precedents for all ARPGs thereafter. Kuchera does, however, make a very interesting point that, with the addition of NetEase as co-developer, Blizzard is showing “what would happen if a third-party developer tries its hand at *Diablo* on mobile platforms.”⁶ He also points out that “the assumption being made, and being spread throughout social media, is that Blizzard is selling out its ideals for a chunk of the lucrative mobile gaming market, at the expense of the fans that have been there all along.” These fans are PC gamers. He even quotes David Brevik and his obsession with PC games specifically, showcasing that the franchise has always released on PC or Mac prior to any other platform.⁷ Kuchera ends his argument by restating that Blizzard “is once again breaking one of the core expectations the company has built across decades of game releases.”⁸ While his argument is slightly flawed due to its lack of recognition that *Diablo* did, in fact, invent a genre, he’s not wrong in his conclusion here.

Herein lies the major issue with *Diablo Immortal*. Not only is it “breaking...core expectations,” and thus deviating from social expectations and conventions of its usual genre, franchise brand identity, and design ethos, it is also expressing entirely new genres in the franchise. These new genres—that of the MMOARPG and mobile game—do not

⁵ Ben Kuchera, “*Diablo: Immortal* Broke the Unspoken Rules of Blizzard, and BlizzCon,” *Polygon*, November 5, 2018, <https://www.polygon.com/2018/11/5/18064290/blizzard-diablo-immortal-reaction-explainer-blizzcon>.

⁶ *Ibid.*

⁷ *Ibid.*

⁸ *Ibid.*

fit in with the traditional design ethos and franchise brand identity for the *Diablo* series. There is a necessary disconnect of gameplay between the original three titles and this new iteration that causes me to feel uncomfortable while playing—almost as if I’m not even playing a *Diablo* game. This out-of-place feeling for the game stems from its choice of genre. In this chapter, I will explore what gameplay is like and discuss genre, design ethos, and franchise brand identity as I do so. I will point out how the genres of MMOARPG and mobile game do not quite mesh with social expectations for the franchise, and thus the franchise brand identity. Because I have also specifically attached the design ethos of the franchise to the team responsible for it rather than to the studio as a whole, this connection of genre is an important one. Bódi actively dismisses genre from her discussion of design ethos, but I will demonstrate that an inclusion of the concept can broaden the applicability of her term and add depth to its discussion and analysis, especially in the case of games that invent or define a genre. I will also discuss how player agency is consistently diminished by way of the genre conventions of *Diablo Immortal*.

To get a better feel for how all of this works out firsthand and in real time, I thought it paramount to play the game again. I chose to start over at level one for several reasons. Most notably, I had forgotten all the intricacies of the build of my last Necromancer, but I also started from scratch because I thought that that would be the fairest way for me to determine just how much gameplay was available prior to the worse parts of *Diablo Immortal* cropping up. I wanted to know exactly when time-gated content, forced multiplayer content, microtransactions, and purchasable workarounds were made integral to my daily play. I also wanted to track how quickly I was able to

level up with the experience boosts that are based on how far behind you are from the server's Paragon level. The servers have what is called a "World Paragon Level that 'dictates' the expected Paragon Level of current max level players" and there is a mechanic that sees that "characters with Paragon Levels lower than the World Paragon Level will get increased experience" while those "with Levels higher will get reduced experience."⁹ This is supposed to level the playing field for those that are behind the people that play constantly and are pushing the upper end of the server's level. Further, it did not seem very pragmatic of me to base my judgments off year-old experience of the game: for me to ignore all the changes that had been made via patches and updates throughout the year of the game's existence. So, I opened the app on my phone on August 28th, 2023,¹⁰ a little under fourteen months since the game's release, and created a brand-new character.

Diablo Immortal

Now it's time to get to the actual game for analysis. Originally, there were six classes to choose from. There's the Barbarian, which is a "savage wanderer" who can "use brutal attacks to crush any opposition."¹¹ Then there's the Crusader, who is a "wrathful zealot" that can "vanquish evil wherever they go, dominating the battlefield through sheer purpose."¹² The Crusader is like a Paladin, for those more familiar with the latter. You have the Monk that is a "master of martial arts" with "lightning-fast strikes

⁹ Rhenn Taguam, "Diablo Immortal: Paragon Leveling Guide," *Game Rant*, January 17, 2023, <https://gamerant.com/diablo-immortal-paragon-leveling-guide/>.

¹⁰ Game Version 2.0.6.

¹¹ "Diablo Immortal," n.d., <https://diabloimmortal.blizzard.com/en-us/>.

¹² Ibid.

that pummel enemies with a dizzying array of blows and mobility.”¹³ These comprise the fighting classes, while the Demon Hunter, their ranged damage class armed with crossbows, is a “vengeful stalker” that can “assault from afar” and “strike undeterred until their prey is at their mercy.”¹⁴ Finally, you have the casters, comprised of the two classes of Wizard and Necromancer. The Wizard is a “living conduit of arcane power” that can “manipulate arcane forces to strike from a distance, disintegrating their enemies to oblivion,” while the Necromancer is a “manipulator of life and death” that “use their powers over life and death to preserve balance in Sanctuary.”¹⁵ Many players of RPGs will recognize quite a few of these class titles, noting that the roles covered here are similar to those found in even classic tabletop RPGs like *Dungeons & Dragons*. The Blood Knight was announced on July 6th, 2023 as the seventh class available for *Diablo Immortal* and was available to play as of July 13th, 2023.¹⁶ The Blood Knight is a new addition to the franchise that is a “monstrous protector” who has “cursed vampiric powers” that allow them to “devour the lifeblood of their foes” while they “keep them at bay with knightly polearms.”¹⁷ This addition is intriguing, as this kind of dark, blood-drenched gameplay fits the franchise’s aesthetic quite nicely.

Bódi points out that “building a character according to any one profile in the ‘holy trinity’ of role-playing game design, namely ‘tank, healer, damager’...can have implications for the avatar both in a ludic and a representational sense.”¹⁸ She is referring

¹³ Ibid.

¹⁴ Ibid.

¹⁵ Ibid.

¹⁶ Blizzard Entertainment, “Introducing the Newest Diablo Immortal Class: Blood Knight,” July 6, 2023, <https://news.blizzard.com/en-us/diablo-immortal/23967323/introducing-the-newest-diablo-immortal-class-blood-knight>.

¹⁷ “Diablo Immortal,” n.d., <https://diabloimmortal.blizzard.com/en-us/>.

¹⁸ Bódi, *Videogames and Agency*, 54.

to how these choices can affect both the gameplay itself and the representation of the character in terms of the story line or roles in groups. For the sake of the *Diablo* franchise, there has always been very little difference, if any at all, between roles chosen and their effect on the story. This is because the plot of all games in the franchise is relatively straightforward with very little room for individualization. Each game's plot can be roughly summarized as the devil, Diablo, is coming, and that must be prevented at all costs. On the other hand, in terms of ludic implications, each playstyle for each class is wildly different as far as which abilities to use at which time is concerned. The choice of which kinds of abilities a player wants to use is one that directly involves what gameplay is going to be like for that player.

Further, the choice between damage and tank classes does have a direct impact on what kind of roles the player will fill when it comes time to group up with others to run dungeons or defeat raid bosses. However, in the case of *Diablo Immortal*, each player only has access to five abilities at a time—six if you include the ultimate ability that crops up every so often—and the actual controls of these result in a lot of button-mashing regardless of class. Once you have your ability rotation down, or the order in which you use your abilities, and you've mastered any directional controls that aim certain abilities, which are automatically directed at enemies should you choose not to aim at all, all classes boil down to a relatively monotonous repeat of the same buttons over and over ad nauseum. In this sense, the configurative agency afforded by choosing a class seems incredibly diminished when faced with what the gameplay looks like as far as controls are concerned. To be fair, this is not necessarily all that different from previous iterations

in the franchise, as *Diablo III* was also seen as a button-mashing game. *Diablo* and *Diablo II* were far more strategic in their actual controls.

I chose to play another Necromancer, as I have always enjoyed the use of the undead as my horde of both cannon fodder and extra damage. Each class can choose between either a male or female character with customizable physical features—staples in character creation. The customizability of these characters is quite in-depth for a mobile game, and one could spend hours tweaking their character’s appearance. As Bódi highlights in her discussion of configurative agency, “this game design affordance is one of the key components of role-playing games...and is becoming increasingly prevalent in other videogame genres as well.”¹⁹ The level of customizability offered in *Diablo Immortal* yields relatively high configurative agency as it allows players to mold their appearance quite a bit. However, as noted earlier in chapter two, there are some limitations regarding the race of the characters. For example, the Wizard class is relegated to mostly pale skin tones with few options for avatars of color. Though these options exist, they feel few and far between compared to the overwhelming number of choices for white avatars.

There is much that has been written about avatars and how this relates directly to the personal identification with a character and empathy and immersion of the player for their own character, but my discussion of this is limited to that of diversity from chapter two. It is also helpful to remember that that beautifully sculpted face may end up hidden by a cool looking helmet, and it’s important to keep in mind that loot has always been the

¹⁹ Ibid.

focus of this franchise. For this and many other reasons, there are also a handful of stock appearances that you can choose from, again overwhelmingly white, and these come in handy for anyone who wants a general aesthetic appeal yet does not want to spend a lot of time doing all of that tweaking to get it. Because I had not played in a while, my game needed a substantial amount of time to update. These updates did not necessarily hinder me from entering basic gameplay, but they did stop me from customizing my appearance beyond some of the ready-made options.

As I wanted to get to the gameplay as quickly as possible, I picked a rather gaunt, pale looking premade woman and jumped right in. I will now begin to narrate my gameplay experience as it occurs chronologically. I think this is important to capture the organic feel of when the game introduces me to its paid content as well as when I come across any timegates or pay walls, so that I may directly address these issues as they crop up in gameplay and demonstrate how quickly the game falls apart via genre conventions. The game opens on a small boat with a guide that informs you that the town of Wortham is just ahead, warning you to be wary of the monsters that lurk in the forest. The aesthetics are dark, gothic, and ominous, as most previous *Diablo* games. The look and feel of the environment are familiar and pleasantly haunting as I maneuver my character down the docks and onto the path, and I think that the developers' choices here were incredibly smart. They stuck to the core graphic feel and camera angle of the franchise in a way that reminds any player of the legacy of *Diablo*, yet this promise is thus far only skin deep. Regardless of how surface-level these choices seem, they still stick to the core franchise brand identity and design ethos for the previous games in that they do reiterate the aesthetics that fans have come to know and love. The game provides immediate

tutorials for movement and attacking as I am almost instantly thrust into combat a few paces down the path. Again, this quick introduction of combat sticks to the ethos for the franchise and allows for that instant action associated with the ARPG genre.

After defeating the first undead creature and moving further into the dark forest, more waves of monsters are presented to me, while my character quickly gains new skills in combat. I can now direct my undead pets to attack certain creatures and swing my scythe at enemies in whatever direction I choose. This seems to allow spatial agency, or “the possibility space comprised of movements the avatar can and cannot perform,” in terms of which monsters I am interacting with and in what direction.²⁰ Contrarily, as I noted earlier, I can also just allow the game’s mechanics to choose the direction for me, which automatically targets the nearest monster. So, this spatial agency is only as free as the player wants it to be—they can choose an “easy mode,” so to speak. Arguably, this can offer its own kind of agency to choose a playstyle—with added control of abilities on one hand and automatically assigned directions on the other—or choose to mix the playstyles and allow the game to control direction of abilities whenever a fight seems too overwhelming or vast to choose directions. Every class has some abilities that require directional input or a choice of location on the playable space within a fight, and these choices make split decision fighting, at least at the beginning of the game, more in-depth and entertaining. However, as I touched on earlier, gameplay becomes stale rather quickly and this choice of direction or location for abilities does little to remedy the monotony of button-mashing.

²⁰ Ibid., 45.

It was not long before I came upon my first epic creature with a purple name and a health bar at the top of the screen as opposed to hovering just above its head. This is a “boss” of sorts, and the game has prepared me for most types of combat right from the beginning. I greatly appreciate the pacing of the game at the tutorial phase here. It feels like the action starts the moment you begin to play; the dialogue is just enough to let me know that the cultists have infested the lands and that the town needs help eradicating the beasts surrounding them in the creepy woods and inside a twisting cave to the West, while the combat is varied and allows for players to familiarize themselves with different encounters from the moment they place their thumbs on the phone screen (unless, of course, you’ve shelled out for one of the helpful controller-add-ons for your phone).²¹ The design choice to immerse players in combat like this keeps up with the design ethos and franchise brand identity for the *Diablo* series as well as places the genre of ARPG at the forefront of play. The choice to make the action portion of the ARPG genre so prevalent to beginning play does seem misleading, though, when one gets to end-game content in that the controls become stale, and the multiplayer content becomes the focus of gameplay while the solo content is either boring MMO-related grinding or hidden behind time-gates and paywalls.

Once I’ve gone to Wortham after having freed the Blacksmith from the cultists, the first primary endgame boss is revealed: the demon Skarn, Lord of Damnation. I am

²¹ *Diablo: Immortal* came out with a promoted *Backbone* device for phones that allows players to transform their phone into a controller with buttons on either side of the screen. Instead of having to play on your phone’s screen, you hold the entire controller with the screen in the middle. It is greatly beneficial for gameplay and creates a separate, rather lucrative stream of income for the company in addition to the game itself. This was, without a doubt, an incredibly intelligent business decision on the part of Blizzard Entertainment.

told to go to the famous Deckard Cain, a character that has been in every *Diablo* game and is much loved by fans, for more information. Here we can see one of the franchise's main internal characters repeated, and, thus, the franchise brand identity remains intact in that famous characters are brought back for this installment in the series. Cain gives you a bit of a recap of *Diablo II* and sets the stage for the plot of this game—the events that occur between *Diablo II* and *III*. The hell spawn is trying to get shards of the Worldstone (a stone that holds the cliché power of creation). For anyone not familiar with the plots of the previous games, basically the demons are obvious bad guys out to wreak havoc on and eventually take over the world by obtaining the Worldstone for its power to remake the world in hell's image. This franchise is not necessarily known for plots, so it is little bother that this game takes place between two others and serves as somewhat of a “filler” plot—as long as you're still slaying demons and fighting through dungeons. In this way, we have very little narrative or dramatic agency, as outlined by Bódi, because we cannot “meaningfully intervene in the designed structures” of narrative.²²

While avatars are central to the story, the demonic hordes continuously invade the lands regardless of avatar action, and it can be argued that the plot moves no matter what the avatar does. The narrative is also always linear and does not involve any player choice as far as progression of the narrative is concerned—all players will go to areas in the same order and experience major plot points at the same point in the story. Sure, one can choose to run side quests or repeat whole areas over and over, but this does nothing for the narrative itself. As noted from the beginning, narrative agency or dramatic agency

²² Bódi, *Videogames and Agency*, 59.

is not necessarily one that need be explored within the *Diablo* franchise, though I can imagine some interesting studies could be produced if that were the primary focus. For the purposes of this project, however, I won't dwell on the narrative agency discussion. So, within less than half an hour of gameplay, I have experienced multiple kinds of combat, gone through a dank, dark cave, and been introduced to the primary plot and beloved characters, all while keeping to the original aesthetics for the franchise. So far so good.

Further play brings me into a deeper cave of the cultists, solidifying their plan and revealing that they already have a Worldstone Shard. I collect this from a giant demonic beast called Ifriss the Destroyer and bring it back to Deckard Cain for examination. I have also since looted my first blue, or magic, items for my character, already scratching the player's itch to begin the loot grind and obtain better gear. There are five rankings of gear in this game: common items with white names, magic items with blue names, rare items with yellow names, legendary items with orange names, and set items with green names. The set items give additional boosts based on how many items from the set your character is wearing. This cave features a few short cutscenes and serves as a cementing point wherein the player begins to feel a sense of urgency revolving around the hellish beasts that are infiltrating the world. Cain informs me that it is now my responsibility to collect the scattered Worldstone Shards and gives me a map, which previews the areas of the world that I will visit and outlines, yet again, the importance of saving the world and collecting the Shards before the forces of hell can obtain them. Thus begins the quest for the character, and once again I am thrust back out into the world to fight monsters. Upon leaving the chapel, I am congratulated by the game and given the first taste of marketing.

It is at this point that the true nature of the game begins to be revealed. Still under the half-hour mark, I am already being told to “Open the Codex to view the Guide.” Once opened, the Guide allows me to claim rewards based on tasks that I complete like equipping special items or finishing quests. At the top of the Guide lies the looming Battle Pass, which I have not unlocked yet, that seems to be tied to this Guide and my completion of these tasks. There are two, scaled purchasable upgrades that give you cosmetic armor and, most importantly, in-game items that catapult a character ahead of those without the paid passes. One of the items that is given in abundance is an upgrade material for the Helliquary, a part of the game that greatly increases a players’ combat rating which allows them access to higher level raid fights for endgame content. The free version of the battle pass has zero of these upgrade materials, which, without the paid content, you must complete raids and obtain at an alarmingly slow rate later in the game. Another item in abundance for those who pay are Aspirant’s Keys, which unlock chests that reward players with yet another form of upgrade material that increases player stats later in the game. Again, the free battle pass has zero of these. The paid pass also includes more normal gems and legendary gems that can be socketed into armor for even more stat increases. This puts players that pay the monthly fee leagues ahead of those who do not and provides players with their first option to purchase content, though the concept of a battle pass is nothing new to gaming. Many games have implemented these battle passes to mimic a monthly subscription, and *Diablo Immortal* is no exception with one upgrade that costs \$4.99 per battle pass cycle, which lasts around a month, and another tier at \$14.99. The highest tier unlocks a trove of cosmetic gear, a more acceptable paid content for most players, yet still grants access to even more legendary gems and

Aspirant's Keys. The inequality stacks up as players spend more money on what feel like unfair advantages.

This kind of pseudo-subscription service is a relatively common one that, nevertheless, greatly favors those that spend money. Most people understand that “some kind of payment is necessary for the labor that goes into designing a game.”²³ However, as Erica Neely points out, “particularly in multiplayer games,” of which an MMOARPG certainly is, “the ability to purchase items raises questions about whether this is an unfair way of gaining advantages in the game.”²⁴ Neely also makes the incredible argument that developers who hide “the need for microtransactions until a player is already invested in the game” makes it to where “players cannot make informed judgments about whether to play the game” in the first place.²⁵ The fact that the Battle Pass is hidden from me in the beginning goes along these lines. The player doesn't realize how useful this purchase is until all these materials' uses are revealed through gameplay—which does not occur until late game content, wherein a player is, presumably, very invested in their character. At that point, this “can easily lead to exploiting players by trading on the sunk cost fallacy.”²⁶ Further, the difficulty of obtaining the items offered freely and frequently through the Battle Pass could constitute “introducing frustrating elements into a game solely to drive the purchase of microtransactions” which Neely argues is “unethical.”²⁷

²³ Neely, “Come for the Game, Stay for the Cash Grab: The Ethics of Loot Boxes, Microtransactions, and Freemium Games.”

²⁴ Ibid.

²⁵ Ibid.

²⁶ Ibid.

²⁷ Ibid.

As we saw from *Diablo III*, the ability to purchase gear in the Auction House significantly reduced the excitement for and core values of the game, removing it from its genre conventions and design ethos as a loot-grind, dungeon-crawling ARPG. While *Diablo III* removed this function when they removed the Auction House, *Diablo Immortal* has built in purchasable workarounds for looting practically every resource and item type. The ability to circumvent any grind in the game, of which there are many for *Diablo Immortal*, is equally as forsaking of core values and, further, is an unethical inclusion of pay-to-win mechanics, which are a frequent inclusion in the mobile game genre. Importantly, the unethical addition of frustrating elements can be seen with almost all purchasable content—namely, the legendary gems obtained through rifts. For these and so many other resources and items in-game, we are given an in-game currency that is purchased with real-world money. However, we should not see a difference between purchasing a currency and purchasing what the currency can purchase, as the “currency functions as a kind of very flexible item” that merely serves as a middleman.²⁸

The other major thing that has been highlighted for me thus far in my gameplay is the shop. Categories in the menu that require my attention have a small, red jewel next to them in their upper-right-hand corner. Unless I click on these menus, the gems stay. Each of these gems lets me know that there is something to look at and/or claim when I click on these sub-menus. First, I check the mail icon and find that I’ve received a bunch of resources for downloading and updating the game in entirety. Then, I look at the first kill of the day offer to claim a breastplate as a reward for logging in and killing a monster one

²⁸ Ibid.

day in a row. It looks as though there are rewards for up to seven days in a row, including a magic ring, a legendary gem, resources, a rare weapon, and a legendary helmet. These reset after seven days of inactivity, requiring the player to log in seven times, each time within seven days of the last login, to get the legendary helmet.

The final alert gem hovers in the corner of the shop icon. When I click on this, there are an additional two things to click through to clear my alert gems: the free daily rewards (which consist of weapon upgrade resources with a very low chance of getting materials necessary to upgrade rare or legendary gear) and the cosmetics tab (which shows the available cosmetic armor sets that are for sale for Eternal Orbs—the game’s bought currency). On the featured page, there are options for purchasing Eternal Orbs, and a sneaky \$0.99 option for a beginner’s pack that contains orbs and a cosmetic weapon. This is where the game gets a little nefarious, as the sixty orbs are not enough to purchase anything of substance in the game, duping players into spending a small amount of money only to need to spend more money later to use the orbs that they purchased. What’s more frustrating is that when I leave the shop menu to get back to gameplay, there is another alert system in the form of a bell above my quest tracker that tells me that there is a one-time bundle available in the shop—referring to this beginner’s pack. This notification bell reminds me every single time that I log in that the beginner’s pack and the Boon of Plenty (a login-reward-based system that builds rewards over thirty consecutive days, including Eternal Orbs, for \$9.99) are available. The constant inclusion of these redirections towards the shop is a design choice that goes far against the design ethos set up by the previous three games. However, as I’ve consistently pointed out, this kind of consistent popping up of purchasable content is conventional for mobile games.

As I plan on playing as much as I can without ever purchasing anything, I close the shop window and continue my merry way to Ashwold Cemetery.

It is here that I finally get to enter a dungeon. These are not randomized dungeons—thus, they are not the same kind of dungeons that are conventional for the ARPG genre as set up by the previous games in the franchise—and require a party to get the best gear possible to drop. I can play them as a solo player and accept that I have a very small chance of looting anything worthwhile, which is fortunate because the wait time for a group is incredibly long. This lack of solo dungeon content in the regular open world and focus on multiplayer content is troubling, as it represents yet another way in which this game has strayed far from the design ethos and franchise brand identity of a dungeon crawler or the ARPG as a genre, to be discussed later. For now, I was able to go in, complete my quest, and come back out without any trouble. I find yet another Worldstone Shard in the Cemetery and take it back to Cain, now in the main city of Westmarch. Once in Westmarch, the finding of shards will comprise the remainder of the main campaign portion of the game, and I will most likely be exploring all the new areas with this intention. Cain introduces me to socketing gems in my gear, and Charsi, a blacksmith, introduces me to the Rifts in the game.

There are two types of Rift: Challenge Rifts and Elder Rifts. It is the Elder Rifts that are the only procedurally generated maps in the game that grant Legendary Gems²⁹ to socket into legendary gear and grant special abilities to your character, while the Challenge Rifts are dungeons designed to time how quickly you can complete them. This

²⁹ Legendary Gems should not be confused with the regular, stat-based gems that can be added to non-legendary gear.

greatly limits the spatial agency that players can engage with, as the only options for seemingly limitless maps that defined the dungeons in previous *Diablo* games are hidden behind massive paywalls and time-gates. Elder Rifts require Crests to grant a higher chance of dropping the Legendary Gems. How does one acquire Crests? Pay for them with money, notably one hundred and sixty orbs or one hundred more than the basic \$0.99 purchase grants, purchase them with the in-game currency Platinum that takes an incredibly long time to gain and has its own weekly cap for gaining it, or wait for a weekly drop of a Rare Crest. There are also three types of Crests, the Rare Crest, which grants a chance to reward bound Legendary Gems. Bound in this case refers to the gems' attachment to your character. If the gem is bound, you cannot sell it in the Auction House. So, the most common type of Crest, the Rare Crest, the easiest and free to obtain, only grants a chance to loot gems that cannot be sold to other players. There is also an option to purchase these with orbs. The game will prompt you to use orbs instead if you try to purchase one without enough Platinum, yet another way in which the game tries to get you to spend real money. Rare Crests also have a weekly purchase limit of three.

Legendary Crests have a weekly purchase limit of one. A Legendary Crest guarantees a bound legendary gem, that cannot be sold for a profit, upon completion of an Elder Rift. Eternal Legendary Crests are the only Crests that reward unbound legendary gems. These can be obtained by completing a weekly raid with your Warband, a group of tightly knit players, smaller than a Clan, that are difficult for a newbie to get into. It has a limit of one per week and requires highly difficult multiplayer play with a specific group of organized people rather than the raids completed via a party-finding

system.³⁰ They can also be bought with Eternal Orbs, as was to be expected. There is no weekly purchase limit on the Eternal Legendary Crests bought with orbs, and the only thing required to obtain them is a credit or debit card. This unfair advantage to those who spend money, as mentioned above, represents another way in which the game seems to be adding unnecessarily frustrating elements—the ridiculously long grind or the time-gated drop rates and grindable, in-game currency purchase limits—to push purchasable content.

Let us also take a moment to consider the difference between being able to trade looted gems on the market or not. The only way to do this is to purchase an Eternal Legendary Crest, and, thus, the obvious advantage of market control is given directly to paid players only. This is incredibly problematic, as for free-to-play players, “it is crucial to be able to freely trade on the market, but without paying, it seems that they are not able to engage in trading in any form.”³¹ To put it bluntly, as Josh Strife Hayes states in his video “The Immoral Design of Diablo Immortal – Legendary Crest Addendum,” this is an “incredibly unfair sneaky hidden design choice” that guarantees that “every single legendary gem listed on the market came from an eternal legendary crest, which was paid for with orbs, which can only be bought for real money.”³² Thus, free-to-play players can only make purchases in the market involving legendary gems, again only benefiting the

³⁰ A party-finding system is something that allows single players to enter a queue and wait for the raid to fill up with other players doing the same. It allows solo players a chance to play the difficult multiplayer content without requiring them to be a part of a clan or a warband. However, these are often highly disorganized and unsuccessful without a group of high-level, knowledgeable characters in the mix.

³¹ Syazwan Bahri, “Diablo Immortal Players Find ‘Misleading’ Crests For Pay-To-Play Players,” *IGN Southeast Asia*, June 13, 2022, <https://sea.ign.com/diablo-immortal/186622/news/diablo-immortal-players-find-misleading-crests-for-pay-to-play-players>.

³² Josh Strife Hayes, “The Immoral Design of Diablo Immortal - Legendary Crest Addendum,” June 10, 2022, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=YF--ytWn8mU>.

pay-to-play players by giving them more in-game currency, gold, to purchase even more gems from the market themselves. The benefits to those who pay seem endless.

My first playthrough of an Elder Rift came with a free taste of a Legendary and Rare Crest. This is familiar to anyone who has a cursory knowledge of how drug dealers work—the first one is free to get you hooked. I socket my first Legendary Gems and can move on with the main questline and get back to defeating enemies and getting loot—the original point of the franchise. The main questline has me attempting to reintegrate the Shards into a full stone and destroy them, but the shards have been too corrupted by demons (it is still important to remember that the plot is not the point to the *Diablo* franchise) to complete the ritual. I'm sent to the next area in search of the Library of Zoltun Kulle to find out more about Soulstones and the Worldstone. Of course, the people of the Shassar Sea want me to reconstruct some ancient staff for them to take back control of the area from bandits, so I do that first, making the Shassar Sea a bridging or middle-man map that facilitates my entrance to the next one.

During this time, I am also introduced to the Challenge Rift and the many different Activities and Quests that I can do to level up the Battle Pass in the Codex. Note how much gameplay and investment time I've had for my character before the actual intricacies of the Battle Pass are revealed to me as a player, thus reiterating the unethical way in which the design almost forces character loyalty prior to showing just how integral paid content is to gameplay later. The Activities include things like completing dungeons, rifts, bounties, and pages in the bestiary. The bestiary unlocks different in-depth descriptions of both monsters and bosses over time, but the pages that get unlocked are at random. There is a high chance, once you've filled a few dozen or so pages of the

bestiary, of unlocking the same page, so this task is designed to take an excessive amount of time. The Quests available are like the Activities and ask me to kill monsters, complete dungeons, open chests, complete side quests, craft gear, and complete the Activities.

These seem like they overlap enough to be completed in tandem, and each progress the Battle Pass to unlock those rewards. Again, though, the Battle Pass rewards available for free are lackluster at best and do not include any upgrade materials for the Helliquery or Aspirant's Keys. It is also important to note that one can progress the Battle Pass by buying the advancements rather than earning them through all these tasks and quests and such. At every available turn, *Diablo Immortal* seems to allow for a purchasable workaround to playing the game. Achievements are also unlocked for me at this point, which include tasks like exploration of the maps and defeated bosses and rare monsters among many other things—these reward Hilts, a rather common in-game currency that can be used to purchase basic Rare (two per day) and Legendary (one per month) Crests.

Once I unlock the Library of Zoltun Kulle, I reach my first barrier to continuing the main narrative. Even with the game's added experience for me as someone who is so far behind the server's average level, my level is not high enough to fight in the Library yet. I must explore my other options for leveling up my character so I can progress to the main questline—for this, the game has offered up the Legacy of Strife and the game's player-versus-player system that requires me to join a Clan (the game's guild system). Other options require me to join a Warband (the game's intimate grouping system). I do not want to join any of the multiplayer options until I absolutely must, as someone who much prefers solo play and to give fair treatment to judging just how much game content I have access to on my own without paying money. As I level up via bounty board

quests³³ and Challenge Rifts, I realize that when I complete enough Quests or Activities and level up the battle pass, I get a significantly higher amount of experience than I do doing anything else.

Genre and Agency

The most rewarding parts of the game as far as experience is concerned are also the parts that one can directly spend money on, while the actual dungeons fall to the wayside to get set items at much later difficulties. While I consistently run into level barriers to advance the main questline, I find myself constantly forced to interact with parts of the game that do not quite encompass the design ethos of the franchise—the established shooting and looting or dungeon crawling mechanics that have always made a *Diablo* game feel like a *Diablo* game. So, what’s going on here? I argue that the genre conventions exhibited in the game for both the MMO and mobile game genres clash with the ARPG genre and design ethos as established by the franchise. What I haven’t experienced as much in the game, and one of the defining qualities for the franchise, is the randomization of maps and loot. The only procedurally generated maps in the game are the Elder Rifts, and, if you want the best-in-slot loot that is the focus of the previous three games, it is hidden behind time gates and pay-to-win mechanics or paywalls.

These paywalls are comprised of microtransactions, which are conventional for the mobile game genre. What are also conventional for this genre are the time gates that

³³ These are rather boring daily quests that require the player, usually, to kill a bunch of monsters in a specific map. They come in groups of four per map. They are monotonous, tedious, and generally uninspired, reminding one of the daily quests often associated with end-game grinding in most MMORPG’s.

keep a solo, free-to-play player from continuously running Elder Rifts and getting worthwhile loot. This also affects the temporal agency of a player in that it severely limits how much time can be spent playing before one is forced to stop playing or pay to continue. These conventions of the mobile game genre clash with one of the defining conventions for the ARPG genre as well as for the franchise brand identity of the *Diablo* series. In other words, one of the biggest parts of the design ethos for the franchise—the procedurally generated content—is tied to the genre conventions of an ARPG and, thus, also tethered to each *Diablo* game’s identity. The fact that one cannot just dungeon crawl their way to the best loot certainly goes against the established design ethos for the development team behind the previous *Diablo* games. In *Immortal*, players are stuck either paying money or waiting for their free small chances for loot using those cheap, bottom-of-the-barrel Crests. This waiting and nudging players towards paid content is conventional for mobile games and comprises design choices made by the development team to implement these conventions of the genre. Furthermore, these design choices are part of the game’s new design ethos which goes against the grain of the franchise’s brand identity causing players to feel like they are no longer playing an iteration of their beloved game series. The inclusion of dungeons to fight through and procure loot is arguably the most defining quality—or the biggest and most important genre convention—for an ARPG, and *Diablo Immortal* has tainted this from the ground up.

There are other dungeons to crawl through, but as I’ve previously stated, they’re not procedurally generated, playing them solo does not yield the best loot, and the wait time to get in a group for them is excruciatingly long. Having groups as a focus in gameplay is conventional of the MMO genre—something that is also entirely new to the

Diablo series. Multiplayer play in *Diablo Immortal* comprises a large chunk of possible gameplay. While I won't touch on the player-versus-player content, as this is extraneous to the purposes of my project and can be bypassed by players, the raids and dungeons that require multiplayer play for loot and chances to upgrade one's character both account for large amounts of gameplay in *Diablo Immortal*. The biggest problem here also lies in a clashing of genre conventions between the ARPG and MMO genres. In an ARPG, often there is a soft level cap before a much larger level cap. The soft level cap, usually somewhere around sixty, often marks the completion of the main questline before a player begins the grinding of repeated dungeons for loot and what *Diablo III* and beyond calls Paragon levels. The Paragon levels yield skill points to be spent in several skill trees for further attributes and abilities.

Though these skill trees can be maxed out eventually, wherein a player has spent all the points that there is to spend in them, there is no formal Paragon level cap in *Immortal*. Players who gain more levels past the technical cap of 800 can then spend additional points on core stats and have further advantage over lower-level Paragon players.³⁴ While I won't get into the nuances of skill trees and spending points, the important thing here is that there is no formal level cap for players. You can keep playing the game infinitely and consistently get stronger. While this allows for advanced configurative agency, it is not necessarily helpful for new, casual, or solo players. In most MMOs, having no level cap is not the case. There are often equalizing factors like a hard level cap, even if there is some kind of point tree system, that allows players to play

³⁴ Diablo Wiki, "Paragon," Diablo Wiki, n.d., <https://diablo.fandom.com/wiki/Paragon>.

together across the board at that level. Even if one player is freshly at the level cap while another has been there for months and has gained all sorts of gear and additional skill points to spend, in games like *EverQuest 2* and *World of Warcraft*, they can still play the same endgame content together. Now, the freshly level capped player may not be able to keep up and may die frequently, but they are able to participate in this endgame content.

Meanwhile, in *Diablo Immortal*, the highest difficulty setting seems to be the level cap for players, and while there technically is an “endgame” there, new players have months upon months of gameplay to reach it, which would require hours of gameplay daily. Hours of mobile gameplay also goes against the conventional amount of time usually expected for a session of mobile game play, thus alienating *Immortal* from the mobile game genre. *Diablo Immortal* seems to have taken all the most nefarious conventions of mobile gaming, that of the predatory paid content and time gates, while leaving the short-burst gameplay style of ten-to-twenty-minute play sessions to the wayside. In the other MMO’s mentioned, new players often have fast track ways of grinding to the level cap to catch up with endgame content. In *Immortal*, all the solo content is relegated to those boring daily quests and paid content—conventions of the mobile game genre. Because the developers of *Immortal* chose an endless Paragon system, they have baked the vast gap between new and experienced players into their design. This is not helpful for a game with so many multiplayer options for gameplay. New players like me have no way of catching up, as the players at the top are also going to continuously level their characters while I try desperately to get to a place where I can group up with them. The gap widens, rather than shrinks, as they can also play more multiplayer content than I can, as they are on equal footing with a much larger populous

of players that share similar Paragon levels at the highest difficulty. The solution is time traveling back to the release date and playing constantly from then to maintain a similar level to the rest of the players. This, obviously, is impossible. The design of the game has guaranteed that I will never be able to play with most others, thus clashing with one of the most important conventions of the MMO genre—multiplayer content.

Again, there is no equalizing factor for *Diablo Immortal*, as it has maintained the conventional skill-tree, point-based, post-level-cap system of an ARPG. While most MMO's also have a similar system, even the difficulty settings for endgame raids and dungeons in some cases, there is one other equalizer that can be implemented. The only hope is that the game comes out with an expansion pack that does what many expansion packs do for MMO's—shrink the level cap and bring everyone back to the same starting point at the soft level cap. Most of the time when this happens, players keep their hard-earned gear but are forced to start anew alongside everyone else at the soft level cap with a new system for point spending or a new level cap that renders all of what they have thus far earned useless in the new endgame content. However, for a game with the genre convention of constant character upgrading, this may ruffle some feathers and undermine the dedicated play of many characters. ARPG's are supposed to represent constant upward motion, and an event like this that renders a lot of that upgrading useless would go against the genre itself. As it stands, there is no equalizing way to close the gap between old and new players without going against the ARPG genre by redesigning the level cap.

In previous *Diablo* games, this did not matter as much because there were no expectations for the games to have MMO content. The multiplayer content was optional

and far less regimented. One could play with any level—Paragon or otherwise—and essentially “carry” the lower-level character through content. While “carrying” can still occur in *Immortal*, it does not occur as frequently due to the constant need for running the same content daily to keep up with the ever-increasing server Paragon average. The game is designed to be played daily at the level that you are with others the same level as you. While this is conventional for the MMO genre, there is usually plenty of content for new, casual, and solo players to keep everyone happy and comfortable with the game loops that define daily play. And while multiplayer content is not conventional for the ARPG genre, dungeon crawling is, and there should be established dungeons that can be run by new, solo, or casual players on a daily game loop. New players, casual players, and solo players are left out of this equation, making *Immortal* a conventional outsider for the MMO genre as well as the ARPG genre, despite its inclusion of both in its description.

Conclusion

All that defines *Immortal* in terms of these genres by way of conventions and deviations are design choices made by the development team behind the game. It is designed to have paid content and time gates blocking the only procedurally generated maps in the game. It is designed to have a Paragon level system that never caps off. It is designed to be multiplayer and have multiplayer content as part of the daily game loop. These choices define only a few of the ways in which *Diablo Immortal* has gone against the franchise brand identity and design ethos for the series thus far by combining genre conventions that do not work together in the long run. By choosing to create a mobile MMOARPG, they also chose to design a game that tried to tick the boxes defined by the

social expectations for those genres. The game's development team built their design ethos around these genre conventions and deviations because the *Diablo* franchise birthed its own genre to begin with and any deviations or continuations from the conventions set by those first games define *Immortal*'s ethos in the eyes of the public.

In my final chapter, I examined the game itself for which conventions of the genres of ARPGs, MMOs, and mobile games that it included in its design. I also looked at how player agency was affected by these choices. Towards the end of the chapter, I spent a lot of time examining how certain conventions of each genre clashed with others and resulted in what feels like a broken gameplay experience. The game is a bad one simply because it is no longer fun to play after a certain point, but this does not constitute a worthwhile argument, nor does it allow for any scholarly contribution to the conversations in game studies at large. However, the game is, according to genre theory, a bad one when we consider how socially constructed genre conventions simply do not work with each other as they are exhibited in the game's design.

The specific design choices in *Diablo Immortal* greatly limit player agency and force players to either wait for time-gated content or pay money to advance their character—neither of these options are ideal. The only alternative is to have been playing the game since its release and doing so for hours a day to keep up with your server's average level. During this discussion, I also outlined how intimately connected genre was to the design choices and design ethos for the studio regarding this game. The franchise brand identity of the *Diablo* series is partly defined by the ARPG genre as it was the series that invented it, and the design ethos, or the history of design choices made by the studio teams behind the games in the series, is directly connected to whether conventions

of the ARPG genre are included or changed in the design of each iteration in the franchise. The genre is inherently connected to the artistic identity of the studio, as the design choices, part of the artistic expression for the games themselves, directly affect how each game conforms to the genre's legacy as it was defined by the first two installments of the series.

EPILOGUE

Bettina Bódi uses “games design lineages” to trace “lines of inspiration and evolution in game design practice over time, as enabled by technological progress and player practices,” thus “offer[ing] a historical narrative of studios keeping such game design lineages alive.”¹ She argues that framing her case studies in terms of these game design lineages instead of genre allows her to “observe not only *how* the games as artifacts afford and limit agency, but also *why* that may be.”² She removes genre from her considerations of game design lineages because genres tend “to lack connotative consistency.”³ Though there may not be connotative consistency as far as a taxonomy of genres is concerned, there definitely is a consistency when looking at genre through a social lens—which is something that Bódi is already doing when she looks at paratextual materials in reviews and texts surrounding the games themselves. The lack of consistency in a taxonomic look at genre comes from the attempts to get one definitive set of criteria for each genre, which is practically impossible given the constant flux of genre in new media. However, socially speaking, we can view genre through social needs and responses to those needs—which, while almost equally varied, allows us to take genre as an amalgamation of information rather than competing opinions on qualifications. Genre is, if we take Carolyn Miller’s description, defined by social expectations and, thus, outlined by the very reports “in trade press and in journalistic outlets” that help reconstruct design ethos for Bódi.⁴

¹ Bódi, *Videogames and Agency*, 3.

² Ibid.

³ Ibid.

⁴ Ibid.

The lines of inspiration for games that have developed their own genre, like those in the *Diablo* franchise, rely heavily upon the genres as they were established by previous games in the franchise and by “socially objectified needs (exigences)” that need to be addressed with a new iteration of genre.⁵ Part of the primary thrust behind these games’ design is based entirely upon genre conventions and player practices as they are defined through the lens of those exigences. A game studio’s desires to keep a game design lineage alive may very well be directly tied to genre, as is the case with the games that I have examined in this thesis. The relationship between player practices and game design is exactly the kind of social relationship that exists within what Carolyn Miller calls genres: “as typifications, genres are context dependent and culturally significant, and they mediate between private intentions and socially objectified needs.”⁶ Studios’ private intentions are mediated with the players’ needs via genre itself. Bódi’s problem with genre, its connotative inconsistency, lies in the use of genre as taxonomic or categorical rather than as a social act between studio and player.

Carolyn Miller summarizes genre, in the context of contemporary rhetorical theory, “as typified rhetorical actions based in recurrent rhetorical situations.”⁷ Viewing genre as inherently rhetorical and, thus, a social act between rhetor and audience, rather than merely a way to categorize or sort things, creates a nuance in genre analysis that could open games studies theoretical horizons given the limitations of taxonomic understandings of genre. This is because genre does, indeed, constantly shift and change, especially in the case of new media. Miller points out that “the digital

⁵ Miller, “Genre in Ancient and Networked Media,” 180.

⁶ Ibid.

⁷ Ibid, 179.

environment...disrupts the tension between stability and change, enabling and provoking change, attenuating the possibility of stabilization, and thus bringing the very possibility of genres into question.”⁸ This is because genre is often viewed only as a stable concept of criteria for definitions, yet we can see genres constantly emerging around us. However, every new genre, according to Miller, “can only be a combination and recombination of previous genres.”⁹

Genres can never be truly innovative, as they are always building upon similar past rhetorical actions as responses to similar rhetorical situations. As exemplified by the ARPG genre discussed in this thesis, the new genre is built upon an already existing one—the RPG. The differences between the two, while consistently becoming vaster and more defined, were born from a social need to include real-time combat, or action, in an RPG. This need’s fulfillment was, as Bódi sets out to study in game design lineages, “enabled by technological progress,” and, thus, began a game design lineage for the *Diablo* franchise as well as took up the lineage of the RPG and transformed it to birth the ARPG.¹⁰ For games, genre would be better understood through Miller’s view and contemporary rhetorical genre theory. With this understanding, game studies could include genre analysis in their discussions of things like design ethos in the case of Bódi and text analysis of games writ large. For example, with *Immortal*, by analyzing the clashing between a necessity for multiplayer content in an MMO and the constant upgrading of characters in an ARPG, I demonstrate that these two genres should be more carefully considered in game design, as the choices to adhere to certain genre conventions

⁸ Ibid, 180.

⁹ Ibid, 182.

¹⁰ Bódi, *Videogames and Agency*, 3.

made by the *Immortal* design team create a rather broken experience for new or casual players, thus rendering the game an outcast in its franchise.

It is within these socially constructed expectations for genre that we can help define why certain games may receive the response that they do or why one game succeeds while another completely fails. It is in these expectations of genre that I can better articulate exactly why *Diablo Immortal* does not fit in with its franchise brand identity and why the design ethos of the studio takes such a sharp downturn at this installment in the series. I have argued that Bódi's conception of design ethos can be enriched by an inclusion of discussion of genre, and I think that future work in game studies would benefit with this as well. Further, because genres in new media are constantly evolving and emerging, and games are a prolific and influential arena of new media, contemporary rhetorical genre theory would benefit from a more consistent inclusion of games as texts. Games offer a very substantial example of the rhetorical interactions between player and studio that define genre so well, and the paratexts that surround games supply a cornucopia of source material for discovering exigences.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

- Adams, Ernest. *Fundamentals of Game Design*. Pearson Education, 2014.
- Alexander, Leigh. "Activision Blizzard Merger Finalized." *Kotaku*, June 21, 2013. <https://kotaku.com/activision-blizzard-merger-finalized-5023808>.
- Allsup, Maeve. "Blizzard Wins Bid to Keep Overwatch 'Loot Box' Suit Out of Court." *Bloomberg Law*, March 30, 2022. <https://news.bloomberglaw.com/us-law-week/blizzard-wins-bid-to-keep-overwatch-loot-box-suit-out-of-court>.
- Angry Roleplayer. "Diablo 'Immortal' Announced by Wyatt Cheng at Blizzcon 2018," November 5, 2018. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=QmUcQWUJHYs>.
- . "Diablo 'Immortal' Q&A with Wyatt Cheng & Matthew Berger (Senior Designer) at Blizzcon 2018," November 5, 2018. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=s06DMJF6F20>.
- Bahri, Syazwan. "Diablo Immortal Players Find 'Misleading' Crests For Pay-To-Play Players." *IGN Southeast Asia*, June 13, 2022. <https://sea.ign.com/diablo-immortal/186622/news/diablo-immortal-players-find-misleading-crests-for-pay-to-play-players>.
- Bailey, Kat. "Activision Blizzard Settles U.S. Equal Opportunity Commission Lawsuit for \$18 Million - IGN." *IGN*, September 27, 2021. <https://www.ign.com/articles/activision-blizzard-lawsuit-equal-opportunity-commission>.
- . "An Oral History of Diablo II With David Brevik, Max Schaefer, and Erich Schaefer." *VG247*, December 24, 2015. <https://www.vg247.com/an-oral-history-of-diablo-ii-with-david-brevik-max-schaefer-and-erich-schaefer>.
- Bankhurst, Adam. "Activision Blizzard Lawsuit Timeline: The Story So Far - IGN." *IGN*, April 26, 2023. <https://www.ign.com/articles/activision-blizzard-lawsuit-timeline-the-story-so-far>.
- Banks, John E. *Co-Creating Videogames*, 2013. <https://doi.org/10.5040/9781472544353>.
- Blizzard Entertainment. "Diablo® Immortal™: A New Plane Of Hell Opens For Mobile And PC On June 2," April 25, 2022. <https://news.blizzard.com/en-us/diablo-immortal/23787371/diablo-immortal-a-new-plane-of-hell-opens-for-mobile-and-pc-on-june-2>.
- . "Diablo Now Available on GOG.COM," June 6, 2019. <https://news.blizzard.com/en-us/diablo3/22887361/diablo-now-available-on-gog-com>.
- . "Introducing the Newest Diablo Immortal Class: Blood Knight," July 6, 2023. <https://news.blizzard.com/en-us/diablo-immortal/23967323/introducing-the-newest-diablo-immortal-class-blood-knight>.
- . "Making Diablo Immortal For PC," April 25, 2022. <https://news.blizzard.com/en-us/diablo-immortal/23797159/making-diablo-immortal-for-pc>.
- "Blizzard - Lantern," n.d. <https://lantern.labaton.com/case/blizzard>.
- Bódi, Bettina. *Videogames and Agency*, 2022. <https://doi.org/10.4324/9781003298786>.
- Brevik, David. "Classic Game Postmortem: Diablo." Game Developers Conference, March, 2016. <https://gdcvault.com/play/1023469/Classic-Game-Postmortem>.

- . “David Brevik: ‘A Devil Makes History - Classic Post Mortem on Diablo 2’ | Devcom Digital.” devcom - Developer Community, September 10, 2020. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=cuNgTnfk-wU>.
- Brewer, Nathan. “Going Rogue: A Brief History of the Computerized Dungeon Crawl.” InSight, July 7, 2016. <https://insight.ieeeusa.org/articles/going-rogue-a-brief-history-of-the-computerized-dungeon-crawl/>.
- Carpenter, Nicole. “Diablo Immortal Faces Legal Inquiry over a ‘Misleading’ Legendary Gem.” *Polygon*, January 18, 2023. <https://www.polygon.com/23560629/diablo-immortal-lawsuit-class-action-blessing-of-the-worthy-gem>.
- . “Hearthstone Developer Blizzard Entertainment Facing Class Action Suit.” *Polygon*, May 18, 2022. <https://www.polygon.com/23123218/hearthstone-card-packs-class-action-lawsuit-blizzard-entertainment>.
- “Civil Rights and Equal Pay Act Complaint for Injunctive and Monetary Relief and Damages.” <https://Aboutblaw.Com/YJw>. Department of Fair Employment and Housing, July 20, 2021.
- Condor Games. “Diablo: Game Concept by Condor, Inc.,” 1994. https://www.graybeardgames.com/download/diablo_pitch.pdf.
- Craddock, David L. *Stay Awhile and Listen: Book I: How Two Blizzards Unleashed Diablo and Forged a Video-Game Empire*. Digital Monument Press, 2013.
- . *Stay Awhile and Listen: Book II: Heaven, Hell, and Secret Cow Levels*. Digital Monument Press, 2019.
- “Diablo Immortal,” n.d. <https://diabloimmortal.blizzard.com/en-us/>.
- Diablo Wiki. “Auction House,” n.d. https://diablo.fandom.com/wiki/Auction_House.
- . “Diablo I - Diablo Wiki,” n.d. https://diablo-archive.fandom.com/wiki/Diablo_I.
- . “Diablo III: Reaper of Souls,” n.d. https://diablo.fandom.com/wiki/Diablo_III:_Reaper_of_Souls.
- . “Jay Wilson | Diablo Wiki | Fandom,” n.d. https://diablo.fandom.com/wiki/Jay_Wilson#cite_ref-Leaves_4-4.
- . “Loot 2.0,” n.d. https://diablo.fandom.com/wiki/Loot_2.0.
- . “Paragon.” Diablo Wiki, n.d. <https://diablo.fandom.com/wiki/Paragon>.
- Domsch, Sebastian. *Storyplaying: Agency and Narrative in Video Games*, 2013.
- The Editors of Encyclopaedia Britannica. “MS-DOS | Definition, Features, Importance, & Facts.” In *Encyclopedia Britannica*, February 24, 2023. <https://www.britannica.com/technology/MS-DOS>.
- Eriflee. “Reddit - Dive into Anything,” n.d. https://www.reddit.com/r/Diablo/comments/qqjq4y/diablo_3s_first_month_of_release_after_error_37/.
- Fenlon, Wes. “The Story of Battle.Net.” Pcgamer, November 15, 2020. <https://www.pcgamer.com/the-story-of-battlenet/>.
- Forte Capital Management. “Diablo Immortal Full QnA Lul,” November 3, 2018. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=K_XBvg7Lw2k.
- Gach, Ethan. “Inside Blizzard Developers’ Infamous Bill ‘Cosby Suite.’” *Kotaku*, July 29, 2021. <https://kotaku.com/inside-blizzard-developers-infamous-bill-cosby-suite-1847378762>.

- Gallagher, Austin. "What Is a Game Server? Everything You Need to Know." OneCode, July 18, 2022. <https://www.onecode.com/what-is-a-game-server>
- GDC. "Shout at the Devil: The Making of Diablo III," October 14, 2015. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=FG10e0-JyjY>.
- Gray, Kishonna L., and David J. Leonard. *Woke Gaming: Digital Challenges to Oppression and Social Injustice*. University of Washington Press, 2018.
- Grubb, Jeff. "Diablo: Immortal Team Fends off Fan Backlash at BlizzCon." VentureBeat, November 2, 2018. <https://venturebeat.com/pc-gaming/diablo-immortal-team-fends-off-fan-backlash-at-blizzcon/>.
- Hedlund, Stieg. "The Future of the ARPG." Medium, June 9, 2016. <https://medium.com/deru-kugi/the-future-of-the-arp-g-36775abd6b16>.
- Henley, Stacey. "Three Mobile Gaming Devs Discuss Whether Mobile Games Are 'Real' Games." TheGamer, May 16, 2021. <https://www.thegamer.com/best-mobile-gaming-devs-real-games/>.
- Howarth, Robert "Apache." "Another Blizzard North Boss Defects - IGN." *IGN*, June 16, 2012. <https://www.ign.com/articles/2005/09/07/another-blizzard-north-boss-defects>.
- Hunt, Cale. "Why Diablo II Is Still My Favorite Action RPG 20 Years Later." *Windows Central*, May 20, 2022. <https://www.windowscentral.com/diablo-2-nostalgia>.
- IGN. "AAA (Triple-A) - Video Game Dictionary Wiki Guide," April 11, 2020. [https://www.ign.com/wikis/video-game-dictionary/AAA_\(triple-A\)](https://www.ign.com/wikis/video-game-dictionary/AAA_(triple-A)).
- Jensen, K. Thor. "25 Years Ago, Diablo Invented the Loot Game." *PCMag*, January 11, 2022. <https://www.pcmag.com/news/25-years-ago-diablo-invented-the-loot-game>.
- Joseph, Daniel. "The Discourse of Digital Dispossession: Paid Modifications and Community Crisis on Steam." *Games and Culture* 13, no. 7 (February 27, 2018): 690–707. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1555412018756488>.
- Josh Strife Hayes. "The Immoral Design of Diablo Immortal - Legendary Crest Addendum," June 10, 2022. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=YF--ytWn8mU>.
- Kim, Matt. "Activision Blizzard Employees Sign Open Letter Criticizing Company's Official Response to Lawsuit - IGN." *IGN*, July 27, 2021. <https://www.ign.com/articles/activision-blizzard-open-letter-discrimination-lawsuit>.
- Klepek, Patrick. "Activision Blizzard Employees Say They Don't Trust the Company to Keep Them Safe." *Vice*, July 26, 2021. <https://www.vice.com/en/article/akgy9g/activision-blizzard-employees-say-they-dont-trust-the-company-to-keep-them-safe>.
- Kuchera, Ben. "Diablo: Immortal Broke the Unspoken Rules of Blizzard, and BlizzCon." *Polygon*, November 5, 2018. <https://www.polygon.com/2018/11/5/18064290/blizzard-diablo-immortal-reaction-explainer-blizzcon>.
- Lahti, Evan. "Diablo's Battle.Net Originally Ran on a Single PC." *PCgamer*, March 18, 2016. <https://www.pcgamer.com/diablos-battlenet-originally-ran-on-a-single-pc/>.
- Lilura. "Diablo 1 Review," n.d. <https://lilura1.blogspot.com/p/diablo-1.html>.

- Maragos, Nich. "Blizzard Merges Blizzard North into Blizzard South." *Game Developer*, August 1, 2005. <https://www.gamedeveloper.com/pc/blizzard-merges-blizzard-north-into-blizzard-south>.
- Mateş, Bogdan Robert. "Diablo 3 Error 37 - What Does It Mean and Can It Be | GameWatcher," n.d. <https://www.gamewatcher.com/news/diablo-3-error-37>.
- McWhertor, Michael. "Blizzard Responds to Diablo: Immortal Backlash from Fans." *Polygon*, November 3, 2018. <https://www.polygon.com/blizzcon/2018/11/3/18059222/diablo-immortal-blizzard-response-blizzcon>.
- Metacritic. "Diablo," December 31, 1996. <https://www.metacritic.com/game/pc/diablo>.
 ———. "Diablo II," June 28, 2000. <https://www.metacritic.com/game/pc/diablo-ii>.
 ———. "Diablo III," May 15, 2012. <https://www.metacritic.com/game/pc/diablo-iii>.
 ———. "Diablo III," September 3, 2013. <https://www.metacritic.com/game/playstation-3/diablo-iii>.
- Miller, Carolyn. "Genre as Social Action." *Quarterly Journal of Speech* 70, no. 2 (May 1, 1984): 151–67. <https://doi.org/10.1080/00335638409383686>.
 ———. "Genre in Ancient and Networked Media." Edited by Michelle Kennerly and Damien Smith Pfister. *Ancient Rhetorics & Digital Networks*. University of Alabama Press, 2018.
- MobyGames. "Flagship Studios - MobyGames," n.d. <https://www.mobygames.com/company/4165/flagship-studios/>.
- Neely, Erica L. "Come for the Game, Stay for the Cash Grab: The Ethics of Loot Boxes, Microtransactions, and Freemium Games." *Games and Culture* 16, no. 2 (February 28, 2021): 228–47. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1555412019887658>.
- NetEase, Inc. "Investor Relations Home | NetEase, Inc.," n.d. <https://ir.netease.com/>.
- Nitsche, Michael. *Video Game Spaces: Image, Play, and Structure in 3D Worlds*. MIT Press, 2008.
- Old Game Hermit. "Review: Diablo II." *Old Game Hermit*, June 24, 2023. <https://www.oldgamehermit.com/2012/09/review-diablo-ii/>.
- Pjheric. "Reddit - Dive into Anything," n.d. https://www.reddit.com/r/truegaming/comments/g5ij95/where_does_the_who_le_mobile_gaming_is_not_real/.
- Reynolds, Andrew. "Blizzard Entertainment and NetEase Suspending Game Services in China." Activision Blizzard, November 16, 2022. <https://investor.activision.com/news-releases/news-release-details/blizzard-entertainment-and-netease-suspending-game-services>.
- Ruberg, Bonnie, and Adrienne Shaw. *Queer Game Studies*, 2017.
- Schaefer, Erich. "Postmortem: Blizzard's *Diablo II*." *Game Developer*, October 25, 2000. <https://www.gamedeveloper.com/design/postmortem-blizzard-s-i-diablo-ii-i-#close-modal>.
- Schreier, Jason. *Blood, Sweat, and Pixels: The Triumphant, Turbulent Stories Behind How Video Games Are Made*. Harper Collins, 2017.
 ———. *Press Reset: Ruin and Recovery in the Video Game Industry*. Grand Central Publishing, 2021.

- SkinnyBill. "Error 37." Know Your Meme, April 12, 2023. <https://knowyourmeme.com/memes/error-37>.
- Stang, Sarah. "'This Action Will Have Consequences': Interactivity and Player Agency." *Game Studies* 19, no. 1 (May 2019). <https://gamestudies.org/1901/articles/stang>.
- Stanton, Rich. "Activision-Blizzard Lawsuits in Chaos as Federal Agency Accuses California's DFEH of Ethics Violations." *Pcgamer*, October 11, 2021. <https://www.pcgamer.com/activision-blizzard-lawsuits-in-chaos-as-federal-agency-accuses-californias-dfeh-of-ethics-violations/>.
- Taguiam, Rhenn. "Diablo Immortal: Paragon Leveling Guide." *Game Rant*, January 17, 2023. <https://gamerant.com/diablo-immortal-paragon-leveling-guide/>.
- Van Allen, Eric. "Activision Blizzard Employees Plan Walkout Following Lawsuit." *Destructoid*, July 27, 2021. <https://www.destructoid.com/activision-blizzard-walkout-planned-lawsuit-news/>.
- . "Activision Blizzard Employees Sign Letter Declaring Leadership's Response to Lawsuit 'Abhorrent and Insulting'" *Destructoid*, July 26, 2021. <https://www.destructoid.com/activision-blizzard-employees-sign-letter-report-news/>.
- "Video Game." In *The Merriam Webster Dictionary*, February 12, 2023. <https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/video%20game>.
- Ward, Trent. "Diablo Review." GameSpot, January 23, 1997. <https://www.gamespot.com/reviews/diablo-review/1900-2538662/>.
- Wawro, Alex. "20 Years Later, David Brevik Shares the Story of Making Diablo." *Game Developer*, March 18, 2016. <https://www.gamedeveloper.com/design/20-years-later-david-brevik-shares-the-story-of-making-i-diablo-i->.
- 网易, NetEase Inc. "NetEase Games," n.d. <http://www.neteasegames.com/game/hot/>.

GAMES REFERENCED

- Blizzard Entertainment. *Diablo III*. Blizzard Entertainment. Windows, OSX, PS3, Xbox 360, PS4, Xbox One, Nintendo Switch. 2012-18.
- . *Diablo III: Reaper of Souls*. Blizzard Entertainment. Windows, OSX, PS3, Xbox 360, PS4, Xbox One, Nintendo Switch. 2014-18.
- . *Hearthstone*. Blizzard Entertainment. Windows, macOS, iOS, Android. 2014.
- . *World of Warcraft*. Blizzard Entertainment. Windows, OSX. 2004.
- Blizzard Entertainment and NetEase. *Diablo Immortal*. Blizzard Entertainment. Android, iOS, Windows. 2021.
- Blizzard North and Blizzard Entertainment. *Diablo*. Blizzard Entertainment. Windows and Classic Mac OS. 1996.
- . *Diablo II*. Blizzard Entertainment. Windows, macOS, Classic Mac OS. 2000.
- . *Diablo II: Lord of Destruction*. Blizzard Entertainment. Windows, Mac OS. 2001.
- Daybreak Game Company. *EverQuest II*. Daybreak Game Company, Ubisoft, Square Enix. Windows. 2004.
- Synergistic Software and Blizzard Entertainment. *Diablo: Hellfire*. Sierra Entertainment and Blizzard Entertainment. Windows and Classic Mac OS. 1997.
- Verant Interactive and 989 Studios. *EverQuest*. Sony Online Entertainment and Ubisoft. Windows, OSX. 1999.