PAYING TO PLAY: THE EVOLVING STRUCTURE OF GAME PRICING AND INDUSTRY LEGITIMACY

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Late in 2014, Apple changed the 'Free' button in its App Store to 'Get' in part to address "flack from customers and consumer protection groups through the years" for the prevalence of "freemium" apps and in-app purchases, which were not always spelled out in advance of purchase (Hall, 2014). In early 2015 Apple again caused a stir when it added a new category to its App Store for games – "Pay Once and Play." Apple describes games placed the new category as products one can purchase to "enjoy hours of uninterrupted fun with complete experiences spanning the App Store's most beloved genres" (Apple, 2015). Writing about the move, Fahey argued it was due to a "negative perception of F2P [that] is becoming increasingly mainstream" (2015). In both moves, we see a key rhetorical positioning of free-to-play games as less-than, or marginal to, games that come with different pricing models.

How do you pay for the games that you play, if you pay for them at all? How have prices and the logics behind them changed over the years, as games have moved from non-commercial entities played on mainframes, through arcades, into homes on consoles and PCs, and now via a plethora of outlets and pricing schemes? This paper explores how games are priced for sale – from free through hundreds or thousands of dollars – and argues that game price functions not just as a signal of a game's value but also as a sign of a game's legitimacy – or it's lack- in the eyes of developers and the larger game industry.

This project builds on existing work into the rhetorical construction of real games, which identified several traits that mark certain games as 'real' and other games as outside that boundary. To be considered real, games must offer depth and complexity, sophisticated mechanics, a traditional payment structure, and a particular developer pedigree (Consalvo and Paul 2014). Further fleshing out this model, one of the key elements in assessing whether or not a game is considered real comes down to how the game does or does not charge players to play it (Consalvo and Paul 2013). Yet, what impact does payment structure have for console and PC games that charge a single upfront fee, for so-called free-to-play games, and how do questions about

payment structure intersect with other elements of real games? This paper further explores that element by engaging in a textual analysis of media and popular discourse surrounding a variety of videogames with different payment structures.

The traditional, normalized mode of payment is the model that came to prominence via consoles and PCs. Originally developed as console makers sought to sell games on the King Gillette model, where the razor is reasonably priced, but the blades will cost consumers, a single purchase price model constructs games as a product to be obtained. Although recent years have seen innovations with concepts like downloadable content and collectible card systems, like those found in *Magic: The Gathering* or *Madden Ultimate Team*, by and large the price point of 50-60 USD for newly released AAA titles has been quite sticky for console game makers over the last few console generations. PC games have seen innovation in the form of digital downloads, largely through the development of purchasing options like Steam, Origin, and a variety of different bundling packages. By virtue of its long lifespan and its primary use by notable developers, the single fee for a game as product has been normalized over time and is a key marker of what is expected from a regular, 'real' game.

In recent years however a new mode of making money from videogames has emerged. Known as free-to-play, freemium, or occasionally as the derogatory pay-to win, Facebook and various mobile apps have introduced a different mode of paying for games that has transferred to PC and console gaming as well. The primary difference between free-to-play and traditional pricing is that the cost for the game is shifted from a relatively larger upfront sum into a series of smaller, generally optional, yet advantageous purchases. Players can try the game for no-cost, but are typically encouraged or nudged into purchases ranging from a few dollars to 100 USD or more. Different developers and games have pursued alternate strategies to best monetize the free-to-play model, with a general focus either on a handful of players spending a substantial amount of money on the game or trying to get all players to spend a modest amount on playing the game.

Changes in how games are priced have a number of impacts on how games work, from alterations in game design that target regular, frequent play to a shift away from considering games as a product and instead developing them as an ongoing service. In order to make money from a free-to-play game, developers need to retain players over time, which shifts games from a single, packaged purchase into an ongoing relationship where players can spend money again and again. This transition opens up an interesting space to investigate and a primary way to judge what is considered real based on how players pay for the game they are playing.

A final, newer innovation in monetization is the development of games funded by advertising. Generally bundled with micro-transactions as well, games like *Kim Kardashian: Hollywood* combine elements of the broader free-to-play category with a series of interruptions for ads. Offering a funding stream based on the player's time, rather than their wallet, a popular game can make a million USD or more based on the savvy introduction of advertising (Wawro 2015), further confounding how mode of payment helps construct what counts as a real game.

Investigating the discourse surrounding the intersection between the payment models for games and what gets considered a real game is particularly important given that two of the most popular current PC games, *League of Legends* and *World of Tanks*, both work on free-to-play models, yet are hailed as far more legitimate than the Facebook and App Store games that are judged as less than their console and traditional PC brethren. This gap, where some free-to-play games are viewed in a different light than others is another way to chart how the rhetorical construction of real games helps frame how videogames are viewed by those who play them, talk about them, and analyze them.

Understanding what is and isn't considered a real game helps to chart just where video games are and what they can become. Looking specifically at the payment structures of games and how we pay for them structures our perceptions about games, and is a key element in seeing the blind spots in how games are considered. Payment methods in games are an important component of how games as networked technologies are constructed in our collective imagination. This paper furthers efforts to understand how we make sense of digital media, particularly in better articulating what things 'count' and what do not in the eyes of players, developers and industries.

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