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PROBLEMS OF MODERN BUSINESS MODELS IN VIDEO GAMES AND THEIR POSSIBLE SOLUTIONS

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This article aims to analyze modern solutions for monetization in video games, their impact on the design of already existing successful franchises and new, unique projects that have introduced examples of both positive and negative correlations of key product design into the industry, as well as selected monetization solutions and solutions in terms of cooperation, interaction and conflict resolution of the developer with customers.

This study is based on the analysis of reviews posted on game distribution platforms (which provide a fairly high level of sample independence, since selected platforms do not allow to leave feedback without the purchased product, and conduct an active campaign against bots and review-bombing), internet sources which describe and criticize video games, gaming press about historically significant events in terms of developmental cycle, and also on the analysis of the scientific literature on the relevant topics.

The result of this study is a number of criteria for monetization and design decisions in the context of modern business, in consideration of resources available to any consumer for feedback and socialization within the Internet. These criteria were found by analyzing extreme cases of their positive and negative appearances, and are listed with the consideration of their potential impact on the product performance in terms of community perception and associated profits for the developer. The influence of the involvement of players in the creation of cosmetic monetized content, and how this content and availability of software in relation to user modification affects the increasing popularity and number of sold units of the product after it's first release is also analyzed.

Key words: monetization, design, video games, monetization criteria, gaming, development, business solutions

Introduction

General perception of video games has changed drastically throughout the history of the industry and so did the scale, amount of money present in it, as well as design and overall meaning of them from developers' perspective.

If in the 1947 Jr Thomas T Goldsmith and Mann Estle Ray patented device named *'Cathode-ray tube amusement device*' [1], which some consider the first video game (even though most disagree and point out that video games-industry began with *'Tennis for Two'* created by William Higinbotham [2]), then in 2022 video games are represented in a multi-billion dollar industry which creates complex and beautiful, engaging, interesting and overall state-of-art products on the level of film and literature industries.

However, in comparison with those industries, making games is generally (at AAA level of production) a process more complex, involved and risky at informal level of project management [3], considering the fact that a lot of games in our time do not use or simply are not limited to retail and digital distribution monetization methods. Video games are generally more criticized on the internet and mostly are 20-hours and longer experiences that need a lot of polishing to look compelling in all possible dimensions: gameplay, story, visuals, music, and the compatibility of all those factors together. These days, monetization and fluidity of continuous support of new in-game content has become equally important as previously stated criteria for the reasons such as the spread of the "live service game"-model of development, as well as the general amount of digitally distributed games.

And even though it should be quite obvious that those factors and methods should be thoroughly analyzed, compared and fitted to the complex design of video games, while weighting the possibility of players outright rejecting presented ideas, as "parasitic design", "cash-grab" or even "scam". Sometimes those key decisions are not even properly discussed in the respective development teams and studios, but rather they are made on the upper level of marketing and business management of publisher companies. After such decisions get made, they are usually paired with the name of respective franchise (usually the most profitable one) and are handed down to the design team as a final decision, even though it might not make any sense in eyes of designers, consumers and even critics, which in turn might turn out to be the main contributor in commercial and critical failure of the project.

General problem of such decisions consists not only of those rash decisions but also of older methods of monetization classification, which use old and outdated opinions that are not necessarily relevant today, like claims about 6 core business models [4] which might have been considered accurate some time ago. Games evolved as developers implemented methods which were hated by the public in the past, but by mixing several of them they managed to get their product well-received in the respective communities. But those examples of success are only possible when the monetization scheme is well-fitted to the design of this particular project, not the other way around. For that reason alone, video games shouldn't be seen as simple "profit-creators" or "source of renewable income" as Eino Joas, Game Designer at CCP games said in the company's internal newsletter [5].

Why applying old and premade instruments to a new product is not optimal

Even though marketing and business practices have gone a long way since the times of over-the-top advertisements were broadcasted on the black-and-white TVs, big companies still fail to select a proper way to monetize games. Each time, when a new game or a new IP (intellectual property, in the context of video games it usually means a series or franchise) achieves success, makes a lot of money and generally becomes famous one surely can anticipate not only a bunch of sequels, which desperately try to capitalize on the success of their predecessor, but also a burst of new games by other companies copying what their marketing teams deem to be "the key to success".

Sometimes games even switch to a new concept mid-development, abandoning previously established plans, or simply split their developer-resources to add a new mode, which is created solely to follow a new trend. There are examples of such changes being beneficial, like "Fortnite: Battle Royale" [10] becoming the most popular game in the battle-royale genre, even though at first it was supposed to be a cooperative tower defense survival game. This strategy can be seen in the example of a standardized "formula" of games made by

Ubisoft, which permeated the RPG (role-playing game) and action games genre with repetitive open-world components since the release of "Far Cry 3" in 2012 [11].

Even though a lot of gamers might dislike those trends, a lot of such decisions lead to creation and continuous success of franchises like FIFA (which does not even have proper competition on the market of soccer games since the decline of PES games in 2013) or "Assassin's Creed".

Yet, there are also important design decisions that are not only disfavored by vocal public on the Internet, but which also may completely spoil the product for both consumer and producer. The most popular problem that generally either causes a lot of outrage in the community or simply kills the value of a video game is an improperly implemented monetization.

There is never one answer why one game succeeds and the other one fails, while both of them can have nearly identical models of selling the content. Battlepasses, which are one of the most popular ways to monetize free-to-play games in the last 6-7 years, usually sound like a pretty simple idea to grasp as well as to implement. It consists of giving both paying and non-paying players incentive to play by setting up a set of daily/weekly/monthly quests to complete and earn rewards, then add a price-tag of 5-20$ for the ability to get more rewards on the list. If it is implemented correctly, the company gets an active player-base, who are excited to play, unlock new cosmetics and rewards. Such a system creates a self-feeding loop of a stable playerbase in the game, where non-paying players will give a minority of paying players a particular competitive social environment, that, in its turn, gives more incentive to pay for future battlepasses or to buy cosmetics in in-game shops via standard microtransactions.

But if the company gets too greedy and adds a lot of additional layers of pay-to-properly-play to this system, people will complain. Even if the base gameplay-loop (idea and implementation of the game itself) is perfectly executed, fun to play and generally gets positive feedback, the player will still get distracted by an implementation of a system, which would cost more than a premium game (usual price for AAA-titles is 60$) to use fully.

There are factors which are pretty important when deciding how you should choose to monetize your project. They surely cannot be decided without thorough design considerations. However, even those considerations need to be assessed via testing, collecting feedback and concrete design analysis via comparison.

Those factors (or criteria) are only seen when the product capitalizes on them in an extreme manner and gets focused feedback that can point those criteria out.

Even selling the game is not as simple as one might expect

To monetize a game, one can simply

- put a price tag on it
- present it to retailers (if you have enough budget as well as publicity)
- put it in several online distributing services like Steam, GOG, Epic Store, PlayStation Store, Xbox Live.

This method, which was a baseline for AAA games for almost a decade now, is already more complex than what a lot of papers from the previous decade present as "core models" [4]. Retail versions of games generally give you the ability to use an activation code written on the box to get it in your online digital library, as well as the ability to access and download it from any location on the planet with a sufficient internet connection.

Overall popularity of this method is also explained in changes of the general development culture over the decade, as at the time when retail was the main or sometimes the

only way to sell your games, the development cycle was much more polished and unforgiving, as you could not easily deliver any additions or fixes to the game after millions of discs had been already shipped to retail because of the absence of the Internet back then. One of the usual ways of delivering such fixes and patches has been through video game magazines that sometimes had a bunch of patch-files on a CD for recently published games.

Nowadays, however, the majority of people who own a personal computer which meets specified minimum requirements (or video game console), have access to sufficient and continuous Internet connection. The games nowadays are also much more complex and vast than games of past decades. Therefore, several things have changed:

- "Day one patches" are the most common way of fixing bugs, which managed to get through the certification process, but were spotted and reported by the day one buyers.
- Patching games overall became a normal process in game — be it regular bug fixes, unintended design flaws (skewered balance) or even additional content for which the company does not charge you extra.
- DLCs or downloadable content packs are the usual method of additional monetization and content expansion that can vary from small pieces of cosmetic content (like infamous Horse Armor DLC for TES IV priced at 2.5$ [6]) to giant chunks of story and new locations added to the main game.

All of those practices are now commonplace in creation of premium priced games [7] with average length of developmental cycles of 18-36 month, that are generally considered fully realized and are mostly positively critically acclaimed. However, this could be observed only if DLCs are used in places where one needs to use them, and if the base game lives up to the expectations and does not bring a broken or boring experience out of the box and after patches.

Why F2P games make more money and why classification of monetization methods is not needed

F2P (Free-to-play) games do not require the player to pay to get access to the main part of the game. Broad definition of this popular term stems from an even broader number of possible monetization methods which can be used as a substitute for selling the game itself. While one can distribute and sell the game at its face-value without additional caveats in form of adverts or microtransactions, such simple pay-and-play models are usually exclusive to single-player games.

Free-to-play is not a monetization scheme; it is rather a design choice that creates a larger audience and, interestingly enough, a constant flow of players as well. Such a choice usually indicates a game with multiplayer components in its design, which can vary from the game being completely online in its nature to a simple leaderboard. This is exactly what makes F2P games so lucrative – psychological tension and rivalry simulation make people more willing to sacrifice their time, money and even health not to be bested [12].

There is an extensive number of things one can sell in a game and an equally extensive list of ways to push people to buy those things. Plenty of researches and interviews have been conducted and lots of articles have been written in the last decade, which tried to categorize methods to make money by using video games. One of the examples would be David Perry's article "29 business models of games" that contains a list of different ways to monetize one's game, and even a note saying '…there's lots of choices and many of the models can be combined' [13]. Despite the fact that this article is not totally incorrect (neither does it claim to

be objectively correct), its usefulness is pretty limited in terms of actually applicable knowledge. A lot of methods listed are:

- obsolete (pay-per-play and trialware),
- deemed immoral in modern society (selling personal data or 'Sell Access to your Player'),
- not actually monetizing the game (licensing access)
- derivatives from a broader type (Player-to-Player wagering is based on Player-to-Player trading, which is not a monetization method on its own, but a way to actualize and push micro-transactional foundation).

General classification of all the present types of monetization systems, even if done correctly, will either become obsolete in a few years or will be too big and unwieldy to be useful. One monetization system like micro-transactions can and usually is masked to look like something different from "buying right to see fancy pixels" or "buying power in-game to get advantage". Examples of such derivations are the following:

- Battlepass system is just a micro-transaction that gives you seasonal ability, as well as mental obligation (since player has already paid, so if they do not play and complete battlepass, they simply do not get rewarded) to unlock additional contents.
- Loot-boxes (or gacha) are a system, which is considered gambling by the general public, as well as is regulated as such by several countries' governments [14]. The base idea lies in selling the chance to get a desired item, rather than the item itself, generally making people spend more money.
- Subscription models can be implemented on the top of F2P designs with micro-transactions. The only difference from the usual subscription model is the fact that the former gives the player an access to more content, rather than straight-up restricting players from playing.

Those are just a few examples of those derivative systems, which can be combined, matched and mixed. All of them need to be carefully configured, since some modifications can lead to catastrophic blows to the game's reputation and decreasing number of active players.

Exemplified criteria seeking

As was mentioned before, the main part of the selection of the monetization model is the adaptation of the possible options to design criteria, which are generally apparent in the extreme implementation examples. Therefore, the analysis of such extreme cases is needed to properly categorize those criteria.

Premium games with DLCs. Positive example of synergistic design.

The Witcher 3: Wild Hunt

A lot of people, when asked to provide a list of the best games they ever played, would inevitably name "The Witcher 3" among few others. And if game's journalists or blog writers like Shane R. Monroe might praise the game for overall "brilliance in simplicity" in all of its design choices and their realized artistic vision [8], then the same could be said about their realization of the standard premium game model.

At the time of the release (in 2015) The Witcher granted the players a fully-fledged gaming experience that amounted to over 100 hours of gameplay at a price of 60$. By delivering this polished experience it broke a ceiling of over 4 million copies sold within its first two weeks of release. After some time CDProjectRed (developer and publisher company of The Witcher) released a set of free DLCs consisting of cosmetic items as well as additional content for a replay mode.

And then they delivered two critically acclaimed DLCs, which were what every DLC wants to be – synergistic with the base game chunks of content, which added 10-15 hours of gameplay for a price of 10$ and 25-30 hours for a price of 20$ respectively.

But the main point is not even the fact that they are so awesome that "Blood & Wine" (second DLC) won "Best RPG of 2016" award at "The Game Awards 2016" (just like the main game did in 2015), but rather the fact that they are the definition of game-design synergy. Those two packs of content are straight continuations that naturally weave themselves into the narrative, continuing development of all the gameplay features and expanding upon visual fidelity in the new locations presented to the player. That is exactly what additional development should focus on in RPGs when the main focus of the game was all those points in the first place.

Premium games with DLCs. Negative example of parasitic design.

The Sims4

The clearest historical example of predatory marketing politics and parasitic design in premium games was and remains The Sims 4 – a game that at its moment of release in 2014 cost 40$, got pretty average reviews by critics, and was bombarded with negativity by fans, who got a stripped-down version of the game with key features missing, if compared to its predecessor The Sims 3. By the way, the latter was not only positively acclaimed, but also sold over 1.4 million copies in the first week of its launch and over 10 million up until 2011, which made it the bestselling game in the world at that time [9].

The Sims 4, on the other hand, is probably the greediest game of all time, which under the rule of Electronic Arts was made into a "build your game and empty your wallet" kind of deal. To add all the possible features to the game you would need to pay 689$ with no discounts. This was deemed outrageous by the public and for a good reason, since when all of those DLC packs were added in the game it became a pretty unstructured mess of gameplay and vanity features, segmented into their own "design bubbles". Those bubbles are what is called parasitic design – a set of features, which do not add anything to the gameplay, but rather use the main game and already existing features to exist themselves. You can put resources in that bubble, but it will not really give anything back.

As an example, you can take any pair of expansions in a game and check whether their contents can interact with each other. In the Sims 4 most of the additional content usually just does not add anything meaningful to the base game or other add-ons – pets do not interact with vampires in any way, babies cannot really interact with dogs, just as all of them have no interaction with snowy weather added by "4 Seasons bundle". All of it expands the game by segregating the characters into different groups and actually makes one pay over 17 times the base price of the game, to make their character's skin gray and give him the ability to scare others better.

F2P game with microtransactions. Positive example of reward-to-effort ratio.

Fortnite: Battle Royale

Fortnite is one of the best examples of battle pass (BP) and general micro-transactional implementations both in terms of revenue (over 14 billion dollars in 3 years [15]) and public reception. Even though general critical reception for this game might not be the best, Fortnite's BP is considered one of the deals best in terms of **reward-to-cost** and **reward-to-time** ratios. For less than 10$ of premium currency equivalent player gets access to over 100 levels, each of them rewarding with new cosmetic items and premium currency. Players generally praise the quests and characterize them as rewarding and not tedious. Once a player finishes base 100

levels, they also get 1.5 times the amount of premium currency they used to open the paid part of battle pass, which enables them to be able to participate in the next season's battle pass or to use the currency in in-game shop. Micro-transactions also do not affect the game balance, as there are only cosmetic items available for purchase.

F2P game with microtransactions. Negative example of reward-to-effort ratio.

Halo: Infinite (first few months after release)

Halo's release in late 2021 showcased an interesting combination of monetization choices such as selling a AAA story-mode for 60$ and then implementing a separate multiplayer, which was made F2P. The multiplayer itself was met with relatively positive feedback, not considering some buggy parts of the release. Notwithstanding the above-mentioned facts, the monetization scheme caused general outrage both on the Internet and in the review sections in digital shops.

Not only were the prices of cosmetic items in shop overblown, but the 20$ battle pass's progress was artificially slowed down with generally annoying quests (which one could skip by paying additional fee) and overall smaller progress per mission (this aspect also could be mitigated with purchase of progress-boosters) [16].

The system was considered bad enough and backlash from discussions was so big that right after the release developers announced that battle pass is going to be thoroughly reworked to accommodate **reward-to-cost** and **reward-to-time** ratios, and cut predatory monetization tactics from the game.

F2P game with subscription system. Negative example of authenticity crisis. Positive example of adaptability.

EVE Online (crisis of summer 2011 and shift to F2P in 2016)

Eve Online is considered one of the oldest, but still thriving online games on the Internet. Its design being intricate and rewarding enough to keep a steadily growing player base since 2003, Eve was one of the examples of classical subscription-based games that relied on its players to create history and in-game events. Even though its history is well known on the web (stories about in-game events are pretty famous), one event remains a black-spot on its track record.

The implementation of 'Incarna' update in 2011, that brought overpriced micro-transactions and pay-to-win mechanics, is a widely known monetization fiasco, tales of which are still brought to attention by the internet media [17]. Even though overpriced cosmetics were problematic and years to come would show that gamer communities do not think kindly about micro-transactions, the main problem was the fact that developers betrayed the image of the game, which was built over a decade before. They stepped away from the image of the game that players wanted and, more importantly, paid for. By doing that, the company lost its **authenticity**, the image, which was the basis for most players to play the game itself.

A long struggle between the developers and the player base ended with CCP Games losing over 8% of their subscriber base and lowering revenue to the point where the company was forced to lay off 20% of its employees. This, in turn, lead to 'Incarna' update being pushed back and indefinitely placed on hold, development shifted focus on non-parasitic expansions ('Incarna' was a completely new part of a game that did not synergize with anything, but new micro-transactional shop) and prices adjusted.

5 year later, in 2016, the company announced a shift from strictly subscription-based service to a F2P with subscriptions remaining as a premium part of the game. Players could even buy the subscription via in-game means – EVE Online has a big focus on player-to-player

trade and one could simply play the game long enough to buy premium currency using the marketplace. Premium currency still had to be bought via micro-transactions, so while creating a greater influx of new players CCP did not let revenue fall during this process of **adapting** to the new era of F2P games [18].

Conclusions

As a result of generalized research on modern monetization solutions and their applications in regards to recent cases of game market failures the following conclusion was produced: common standard classified solutions are not optimal in majority of cases, where the overall design of product was not taken into consideration and was instead accommodated towards the desired business model. This conclusion therefore led to creation of a hypothesis: there is the possible existence of an informal and unquantifiable system of potential solutions for creating a consistently optimal monetization scheme in accordance with the project's base design. Such a system, or its basis in form of the separate design criteria, could be distilled from analysis on particular cases of distinct positive or negative outcomes, linked with particular design aspects of monetization mechanisms and their effects on community's perceptions of those games.

By analyzing individual cases of extreme examples of successful and unsuccessful implementation of different monetization models with common design factors, which led to the respective relative success and failure, next criteria were deducted:

- Synergy and parasitism – generalized criteria, which can be attributed to all design solutions. It affects monetization and its success heavily, as parasitic elements are usually regarded as "unnecessary" and "unfavourable", whereas synergistic elements might be deemed "valuable" and "worth buying".
- Reward-to-effort ratio – criteria, which shows how much enjoyment a player might get when interacting with gameplay or monetization elements. It can be split into three separate criteria, depending on the type of resource player spends on the particular element: reward-to-time, reward-to-cost, and reward-to-nerves.
- Authenticity – criteria, which generally stems from either reputation and expected course of design change or overall player-developer interaction. It can be detrimental in cases of new monetization systems being implemented or expectations of players being broken.
- Adaptability – criteria which shows the flexibility of design solutions in general. Usually, the need to strongly adapt can lead to break in the authenticity, and signifies that the project cannot move through certain design reworks. In general, this means that the project is already highly stable and does not need to change, but rather needs to grow without disturbing authenticity.

The research about the particular causational effect of these criteria on revenue and player amounts still needs to be performed, as well as the possibility of differing and non-generalized criteria should be considered.

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ПРОБЛЕМИ МОДЕРНИХ БІЗНЕС-МОДЕЛЕЙ У ВІДЕОІГРАХ ТА ЇХ ПОТЕНЦІЙНІ РІШЕННЯ.

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Ця стаття має на меті проаналізувати модерні рішення з реалізації монетизації у відеоіграх, їх вплив на дизайн вже існуючих успішних франшиз та нових, унікальних проєктів, що внесли в цю індустрію приклади як позитивної, так і негативної кореляції ключового дизайну продукту, підібраних рішень монетизації та рішень в плані співпраці, взаємодії та вирішення конфліктів компанії-розробника з гравцями-клієнтами.

Це дослідження базується на аналізі розміщених відгуків на платформах-дистриб'юторах ігор (що забезпечує досить високий рівень незалежності вибірки, оскільки обрані платформи не дають можливості залишити відгук без наявності купленого продукту і проводять активну кампанію боротьби з ботами та рев'ю-бомбінгом), інтернет-джерел з критикою та описами відеоігор, історично важливих подій(в межах циклу розробки) на основі тогочасної ігрової преси, а також на аналізі наукової літератури з відповідних тем.

Результатом цього дослідження є низка критеріїв монетизаційних та дизайнерських рішень в контексті сучасного бізнесу разом із доступними будь-якому споживачеві ресурсами для відгуків та соціалізації в межах мережі Інтернет. Ці критерії виведено з дослідження екстремальних випадків їх прояву в позитивному та негативному сенсі та подані у форматі списку із описом їх потенційного впливу на успішність продукту в плані сприйняття спільнотою гравців та пов'язаного із цим успіхом прибутку для компанії-розробника.

Також проаналізовано вплив залучення гравців до розробки косметичного монетизованого контенту на те, як даний контент і доступність продукту для модифікації позначається на підвищенні популярності та кількості проданих одиниць продукту після його первинного виходу на ринок.

Ключові слова: монетизація, дизайн, відеоігри, критерії монетизації, геймінг, розробка, бізнес рішення.

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