

Subconscious Bias and The Curious Case of Free-to-Play

Christopher A. Paul

Seattle University
901 12th Avenue South
Seattle, WA, 98118, USA
paulc@seattleu.edu

Christopher Wysocki

Seattle University
901 12th Avenue South
Seattle, WA, 98118, USA
wysockic@seattleu.edu

Keywords

Free-to-play, monetization, bias, diversity, rhetoric

INTRODUCTION

Within discussions of video games, certain free-to-play games typically take up the marginalized position that video games often take in larger cultural discussions. Free-to-play games are massively popular and successful, with Blizzard's *Hearthstone* grossing over \$20 million a month (Crecente, 2015), Kabam's *Marvel: Contest of Champions* raking in over \$100 million in revenue from over 40 million user downloads (Hodapp, 2015a), and even long-time holdouts like Nintendo finally allowing other developers to work with their intellectual property by partnering up with free-to-play developers to best construct and market their games to match the new realities of the game industry (Barder, 2015). The success of these games and their wide appeal warrants inquiry, particularly because discussions of these games are often quite critical about their design and monetization strategies. However, other free-to-play games, like *League of Legends*, or games that change their design to incorporate significant elements of free-to-play, like *EVE:Online*, are often exempted from concerns about their design and monetization strategy.

Free-to-play games are relative newcomers to the game industry and are based on a payment model that originated in Asia and steadily crept into a substantial place within the global game industry. These types of games are popular among players because there is no initial cost to try them, while developers and publishers fixate on the ability to make massive amounts of money. There are cases where a game made by two people amassed \$10 million in earnings in three months (Tach, 2015) and one where a single developer pulled in \$50,000 a day in ad impressions (Hamburger, 2014). Free-to-play is different than traditional games because they offer an additional revenue stream through advertising while making a player's potential spending on the game unlimited. Stories abound of players spending thousands of dollars on a single game for a specific reward or item, sometimes so much so that elements of games are developed around the interests of

Extended Abstract Presented at DiGRA 2017

© 2017 Authors & Digital Games Research Association DiGRA. Personal and educational classroom use of this paper is allowed, commercial use requires specific permission from the author.

an individual player (Hodapp, 2015b). This type of monetization, combined with a type of game design imported to the West, frequently leads to discussions among North American and European players about how free-to-play games are bad, often hinging on concerns about the lack of skill players need to demonstrate and the option for wallet warriors to pursue a pay-to-win strategy.

Free-to-play games are beginning to be more widely studied by games researchers, but most of the efforts so far focus on who plays these games or how specific design elements can drive revenue streams. Instead, we are interested in a different project, analyzing the discourse around the genre to make an argument about how the ways people discuss these games can help chart the subconscious biases present in the communities of games designers, journalists, and players.

To analyze the discourse about free-to-play, we will use the tools of rhetorical analysis, focusing on how the discourse creates a symbol system that we can interrogate with the animating questions of ‘what’s going on here?’ and ‘so, what?’ (Schiappa, 2001; Zarefsky, 2008). Applying the tools of rhetorical criticism, we argue that the way that free-to-play games, particularly those designed for mobile devices, are discussed indicates the blind spots and prejudices of players and the community surrounding games. Similarly, game studies has its own blind spots that need to be acknowledged, with presentations and papers far more likely to focus on low-grossing indie art house games than on one of the fastest growing sectors of gaming, one where games typically raise far more revenue and are more widely played.

Ignoring free-to-play or understudying games in the genre stands to leave a large and rapidly growing sector of games outside of the reach of DiGRA. Furthermore, many of these games are particularly interesting as they introduce different mechanics and approaches, challenging established norms and practices of play. And, perhaps most importantly, the different business model and design can attract an audience quite distinct from those who play other kinds of games. Studying free-to-play can help chart the dominant discourses surrounding games, enabling analysis of the subconscious biases the community holds in an effort to make the unseen and rarely discussed prominent and visible.

OPTIONAL BIO

Christopher A. Paul is Associate Professor and Chair in the Communication Department at Seattle University. His book *Wordplay and the Discourse of Video Games: Analyzing Words, Design, and Play* was published by Routledge and his upcoming book, *The Toxic Meritocracy of Games: Why Video Game Culture Sucks* will be published by University of Minnesota Press in 2018.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

- Barber, O. (2015, 19 April). Why Nintendo Teaming Up With DeNA Is Not The End Of Gaming Retrieved 27 October, 2015, from <http://www.forbes.com/sites/olliebarber/2015/04/19/why-nintendo-teaming-up-with-dena-is-not-the-end-of-gaming/>
- Crecente, B. (2015, 11 August). Superdata: Hearthstone pulls in \$20 million a month as it disrupts the card game industry Retrieved 27 October, 2015, from <http://www.polygon.com/2015/8/11/9130779/superdata-hearthstone-pulls-in-20-million-a-month-as-it-disrupts-the>

- Hamburger, E. (2014, 5 February). Indie smash hit 'Flappy Bird' racks up \$50K per day in ad revenue Retrieved 27 October, 2015, from <http://www.theverge.com/2014/2/5/5383708/flappy-bird-revenue-50-k-per-day-dong-nguyen-interview>
- Hodapp, E. (2015a, 31 July). 'Marvel: Contest of Champions' has Grossed Over \$100,000,000 So Far Retrieved 27 October, 2015, from <http://toucharcade.com/2015/07/31/marvel-contest-of-champions-has-grossed-over-100m/>
- Hodapp, E. (2015b, 16 September). 'We Own You'--Confessions of an Anonymous Free to Play Producer Retrieved 27 October, 2015, from <http://toucharcade.com/2015/09/16/we-own-you-confessions-of-a-free-to-play-producer/>
- Schiappa, E. (2001). Second Thoughts on the Critiques of Big Rhetoric. *Philosophy and Rhetoric*, 34(3), 260-274.
- Tach, D. (2015). THEY WANTED TO MAKE A VIDEO GAME PHENOMENON. THEY MADE \$10 MILLION. THE STORY OF CROSSY ROAD. Retrieved 27 October, 2015, from <http://www.polygon.com/2015/3/3/8142247/crossy-road-earnings-10-million-gdc-2015>
- Zarefsky, D. (2008). Knowledge Claims in Rhetorical Criticism. *Journal of Communication*, 58, 629-640.