

# Who Creates Microtransactions: The Production Context of Video Game Monetization

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## Keywords

microtransactions, in-game monetization, free-to-play, loot box, video game production, production studies

## EXTENDED ABSTRACT

Loot boxes, extra moves for a fee, and other in-game monetization techniques have recently attracted interest of the general public and regulatory bodies. To a certain degree, the current discussions about both the ethics and legality of in-game monetization are rooted in a long-standing opposition of traditional player communities against market convergence between triple-A and free-to-play sectors (Milner 2013). The profound integration of monetization and game design is often perceived as a negative trend, which harms the interests of players (Zagal et al. 2013).

Previous research and the industry discourse on microtransactions can be classified into two main strands based on the main point of interest: (1) game content and (2) audience reception. The first approach highlights the poor gameplay and deliberately addictive design of games with in-app purchases (Shokrizade 2013; Bogost 2014). Within this perspective, microtransactions are, for instance, blamed for corrupting the level playing field in multiplayer games (Evans 2016). In a similar vein, loot boxes (a popular form of in-app purchases usually consisting of unknown virtual goods) have been labeled as gambling due to their randomized contents (Abarbanel 2018; Griffiths 2018; Nielsen & Grabarczyk 2018; Macey & Hamari 2019). The second approach focuses primarily on players' motivations to spend (or not to spend) money on microtransactions (Hamari 2015; Carter & Björk 2016; Švelch 2017). Additionally, some discourse analyses map the reactions to the emerging success of free-to-play games from the viewpoints of player communities, the industry as well as regulatory bodies (e.g. Chew 2016). Despite this growing academic interest in in-game monetization, much less attention has been paid to the production context of free-to-play games and microtransactions (Alha et al. 2014 is a notable exception). This lack of scholarly inquiry into the matters of production is symptomatic of current game research in general, which has been criticized for overlooking the issues of production and distribution (Kerr 2017).

With this paper, we aim to address this gap by focusing on the roles and responsibilities related to video game monetization. While microtransactions are seemingly central to public discussions about games, very little is known about the actual professionals who create them. This might suggest a degree of secrecy, which has been observed on the general level of the game industry before (O'Donnell 2014), or a lower status of these roles, especially in comparison to the so-called video game auteurs, who often inhabit the central and privileged positions of game designers or directors (Aarseth 2004; Parker 2017). At the same time, it is important to note that the majority of commercial video game development is a highly collaborative and distributed process, which involves people from diverse professional backgrounds (Consalvo 2013; O'Donnell 2011), and that responsibilities for monetization might be shared among many specific roles.

Thus, we are particularly interested in identifying who the people responsible for designing and implementing microtransactions are. Who defines where and when the game – which might have been bought beforehand or downloaded for free – tries to generate (additional) revenue and what is the value of these virtual goods? We believe that by looking at the practical development aspects of monetization, we can also better understand its contested role within video game culture and the overall critical views highlighted in the previous paragraphs, including the recent audience backlash against loot boxes.

We will answer the titular question of this paper using a mix of empirical methods. First, we conducted nine semi-structured exploratory interviews with German game professionals, which we transcribed and coded using MaxQDA. Additionally, we gathered and analyzed 91 English and German job descriptions from online job vacancy notices that mentioned the term “monetization”. We also searched in-game credits of 68 titles from 2018 for roles related to monetization, including both bestselling triple-A games that include microtransactions and top grossing freemium games (according to Google Play charts).

Preliminary results suggest that monetization responsibilities are often being integrated into various existing roles, including those of game designers or product managers. However, job descriptions of emerging new roles, such as economy designers, live ops producers, or data analysts, also include monetization duties. According to our interviewees, the role is sometimes outsourced to external monetization experts. Notably, credits in games with in-app purchases only rarely disclose who the actual monetization designers or people responsible for the monetization are for a particular game, suggesting a certain degree of integration of monetization into other disciplines of video game production and possibly also an attempt to de-emphasize the more controversial features of these games.

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