

Design Paradigms and Principles for Free-to-Play Games: A Developer Interview Study

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EXTENDED ABSTRACT

The free-to-play (F2P) revenue model has become increasingly popular in the video game industry. For example, the majority of commercially published mobile games are now based on the F2P model where the core of the games can be played free-of-charge while premium content is sold separately in-game for real money. To highlight the success of this revenue model, even traditional retail games are now utilizing it by offering in-app purchases on top of the retail games' fixed price. Though in-game monetization is not a new phenomenon as arcades have been asking for more quarters to continue playing for decades, contemporary F2P games provide much more flexible and nuanced means for spending real money during game play. As the F2P phenomenon is a relatively new one, the interconnections of revenue model, game design, and player experience provide an interesting playing field for academic research.

Although there are few game industry based design books focusing on F2P games (Fields & Cotton, 2012; Luton, 2013; Seufert, 2014), there is very little academic research done into F2P game design from the game developers' perspective. We conducted a study where 14 game developers from Finland were asked their opinions on good and bad F2P design. The purpose of the study was to understand what aspects are considered important when designing F2P games.

The interviewees were a rather heterogeneous sample of game designers. The developers were from six different companies with industry experience ranging 1 to 20 years. Ten developers had worked on F2P games, while six had experience with gambling games. The in-depth interviews lasted from 50 to 100 minutes and various topics were discussed including F2P model, game design, monetization, game analytics, and other F2P game development related topics. The interviews were then transcribed and analyzed with the Grounded Theory approach (Strauss & Juliet, 1994).

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The analysis produced series of codes focusing on various aspects of game design which were then categorized under five themes: 1) generic paradigms, 2) F2P paradigms, 3) generic principles, 4) F2P principles, and 5) Poor F2P design.

The paradigm-principle pair illustrates the different abstraction level in game design. Paradigms can be seen as abstract design guidelines (“game must be fun”) while principles can be seen as concrete game mechanics (“chokedown levels”). Similarly there is a difference between generic and F2P game design. Generic approaches are suitable for many kinds of games while F2P specific approaches are suitable for such games only. Based on this framework, we present a design matrix of paradigms and principles on one axis with generic and F2P specific issues on another. This study is mostly focused on the F2P game design paradigms and principles, and also on poor F2P design which is discussed separately from the design matrix.

Based on the interviews, the developers emphasized on certain key F2P design paradigms such as fair play, equality between paying and non-paying players, scalable game design, production of constantly new content for the players (especially for big spenders, i.e. whales), capability to achieve everything by playing (at least in theory), and the preference of a loose economy instead of tight one. Many principles were also discussed which included selling certain types of virtual goods, using chokedown levels to motivate in-app purchases, offering comeback bonuses, using reminders etc. Examples of poor F2P design were also discussed, like shady offer walls, pay-to-win mechanics, paywalls, and aggressive monetization among other detrimental mechanics which were frowned upon.

This study provides an interesting look at the F2P design for game designers, researchers, players, and other stakeholders. Similar research has not been published before on this topical issue, though F2P games have been studied from other perspectives (e.g. Alha et al, 2014; Hamari, 2015; Shibuya et al. 2015). As F2P games have become more popular, understanding their design and development has proven to be more important and necessary.

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