

Problematising freemiums in digital games

By Al Mik

A lot has changed in the world of digital play over the past decade. The speed and power of processors have produced games that we couldn't have imagined a few years ago, as well as making it completely normal to while away hours on every day mobile phones, rather than requiring the purchase of a specific game playing device. One crucial change is the financial model underpinning play in a digital world.

“Perhaps the biggest problem we’re facing in terms of digital play in the relationship of digital games is that the global games industry has switched partially but significantly towards a kind of open-ended monetisation. Rather than fixed-price experiences, where you buy a game, and you play a game off the shelf like you would buy a book off the shelf, and play it off the shelf.”

Chris Bateman

This was a key topic at the [launch of the Digital Futures Commission late last year](#), along with a lively discussion around [representation within the world of play](#). Taking part in the discussion was [Kate Cowan](#) – who produced [A Panorama of Play](#); [Dr Chris Bateman](#) – who works in the digital entertainment industry as an expert in narrative design, game design, and player satisfaction modelling; [Professor Ann Phoenix](#), a psychologist and academic, whose research focuses on psychosocial issues related to identity; and Professor Sonia Livingstone OBE, who is leading the Digital Futures Commission.

[Freemiums in digital games](#) are often viewed solely from the perspective of consumers and understandably considered undesirable. However, these freemiums can determine the survival or collapse of smaller developers; they allow small developers to develop games that would never get played if they couldn't give them away for free and ensure their return on investment.

Regardless of your position on the model, it undoubtedly becomes more complicated when child users are considered.

“Children, for the most part, do not appear to be prepared for this mix of real money and play money, right? So, nobody mistakes Monopoly money for real money, but children do mistake real money charges in some games for play money, and, so, spend it mistakenly. And parents often don't even realise this is a risk when they let them play games.”

Chris Bateman



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Freemiums in digital games highlight regulatory and education gaps. The gap in education applies to both for children and parents, who are often uninformed of the way that a video game might try to monetise the experience.

“Many games are sustained as services, and they sustain themselves by charging additional fees, usually called microtransactions. So, even games like Minecraft, that started out as a fixed priced product when it was an independent project, after being purchased by Microsoft, began to bring in microtransactions to raise more money from the players.”

Chris Bateman

This in turn raises normative questions – should games be permitted to monetise children’s play? Under what circumstances, and what needs to change?

Freemiums in digital games also raise questions around the voluntariness and the diversity of digital play, and intrinsic motivation to play. These questions highlight one of the major contrasts between play in the offline world and play that is online. In one sense, everything online has been designed, and everything is part of a project often built on a proprietary base. As part of the Digital Futures Commission, we’ve sought to think about digital business models, where creative rethinking is required to enable children to play without commercially driven barriers. We want to see children engage in child-led play in spaces online where they’re able to invent (and break) their own rules.

This blog is part of the play series. You can view the rest of the [blog series here.](#)

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