

Where Do We Fall, Guys?

New Forms of Subscription-Based Monetisation, Their Relationship With Mental Health Issues, and Their Policy Implications

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ABSTRACT

This article examines monetization in video games, with a focus on battle and season passes, their risks and their presence, in videogames aimed at minors. Through the analysis of 105 PlayStation 5 titles, this study explored the prevalence of these monetization systems in free-to-play and paid games, along with their impact on game dynamics and player behavior. The findings revealed a significant uptake of battle passes in free-to-play games and a preference for season passes in paid games. These results of this research suggest a worrying connection between aggressive monetization and problematic gaming practices, particularly in titles aimed at young audiences. This study contributes to an understanding of contemporary monetization strategies and their potential impact on young gamers.

KEYWORDS

Video Games, Criminology, Loot Boxes, Monetisation, Mental Health, Gambling Disorder

INTRODUCTION

The ways people work, communicate and spend their leisure time has been largely reshaped by the digital revolution. Since 2014, the video game industry has surpassed the film industry in terms of economic profit and output. In 2022, for example, videogame profits were not only five times larger than those of the film industry, but also exceeded those of the film and music industries combined (Arora, 2023; Goh et al., 2023). Gaming has been the subject of various controversies, however, drawing both public and government attention (Goh et al., 2023). One cause for this attention has been the industry's aggressive monetization methods, closely linked to the games themselves (Johnson & Brock, 2020).

The study presented in this article examined the most common monetization methods in the current video game industry, with a particular focus on the analysis of so-called battle passes and season passes. Additionally, researchers investigated the video game industry's relationship with in-game social interaction, game immersion and pathological gaming behavior. Despite the scarcity of available literature on this issue, it is understood that battle passes and season passes are two very popular forms of monetization in video games, consisting of regular or one-off payments for access

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to certain in-game content, either through play or through further payments (Sowole, 2023; Zendle & Petrovskaya, 2020). The interest in these systems stems not only from their popularity, but also from their relationship with other forms of monetization and their potential consequences in terms of encouraging excessive spending or pathological gambling behavior.

As highlighted in the European Parliament resolution on consumer protection in online video games, there is a growing concern regarding the impact of aggressive monetization practices on consumers, particularly minors (European Parliament, 2023). Consequently, this study examined the use of battle passes and season passes to determine their prevalence in free-to-play and paid games, as well as establish their relationship with other forms of monetization. Accordingly, 105 PlayStation 5 games were analyzed; 45 of those were free-to-play and 60 in payment. The results showed that a significant percentage of free-to-play games included monetization through battle passes, while paid games trended toward season passes. In addition, the prevalence of elements such as loot boxes and the purchase of virtual currency—associated with pathological gambling—was found to be particularly high in games with a Pan European Game Information (PEGI) rating for children.

The Video Games Industry and Aggressive Monetization

The video game industry—which boasts a CAGR of 4.3% in 2022 and a compound annual growth rate of 16%—reached a revenue of \$184.4 billion USD in 2022, a figure that reflects its economic importance in the global landscape (Arora, 2023; Johnson & Brock, 2020). Much of this growth is due to the increasing popularity of mobile games, although consoles and computers are not far behind (Goh et al., 2023; Johnson & Brock, 2020). The broad demographic of gamers reflects the mass acceptance of videogames. In fact, 61% of the US population, averaging 33 years of age, participate in this form of entertainment (Entertainment Software Association, 2024). This dynamism is underlined by strategic corporate moves, such as the acquisition of Activision Blizzard by Microsoft in 2023, a milestone in the entertainment industry that has become the largest economic operation in the history of the sector (Sánchez-Vallejo, 2023).

Despite these figures, there appear to be some signs of a slowdown in growth, leading to large-scale layoffs within a significant sector of the industry. The industry is still generating a huge amount of profit, however, largely derived from game sales, but also from the application of in-game monetization techniques (King & Delfabbro, 2018; *Game Production Studies*, 2021). Today's industry is characterized by the “freemium” model, which allows free access while monetizing in-game transactions (Dastakeer, 2024; Johnson & Brock, 2020; Zachow, 2023). Among the most common strategies are loot boxes and micropayments, where players spend money for random or specific rewards, ranging from cosmetic enhancements to items that directly affect gameplay (Etchells et al., 2022). Post-release downloadable content (DLC), which can retain essential gameplay elements, provides another controversial strategy that can force users to spend additional money to enjoy the full game experience (Macey & Hamari, 2018).

Subscriptions—such as the season and battle passes discussed in this article—represent a monetary method that grants players access to a system of progression and rewards user participation or additional monetary investment. They are particularly common in free-to-play games (Alha et al., 2016). While lucrative, these methods have been criticized for compromising creative integrity, encouraging addictive patterns of play, and exploiting younger and vulnerable players. Aggressive monetization has been highlighted as a threat to player welfare (King et al., 2019). Indeed, the European Parliament resolution of 18th January 2023 emphasized the importance of consumer protection regarding online video games, particularly for minors. The resolution called for increased transparency, better parental control tools, and harmonized regulations across the European Union to protect consumers from aggressive monetization practices (European Parliament, 2023). This regulatory concern over monetization practices continues to grow, driven by the significant revenues generated by the gaming industry (King et al., 2019).

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