



How can 'meaning' contribute to behavioural change in the persuasive design of video games as media?

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Introduction

It used to be the case in video games that the journey of the player to reach new goals and gear was the main motivator of games' design. These days however, it appears more and more that the primary drive of a game's design is to maximize profits. Whereas previously, all players would have to put in the same effort to achieve certain goals and obtain certain gear, these days a lot of games provide shortcuts in the form of microtransactions. This shift in the developers' approach towards microtransactions the design hurts the overall quality of the video games as it takes away from the meaning players can derive from it. It has caused outrage amongst many gaming communities and many developers have been scolded for it.

There are a number of ways to persuade players to play games. In 2001, Cialdini defined 6 main principles of persuasion; Consistency, Reciprocity, Social Proof, Authority, Liking and Scarcity. In this essay, I will analyze 3 of these principles, namely Social Proof, Scarcity and Reciprocity, how they create meaning for players and how microtransactions affect that. Because, as I will explain below, these three are most impacted by the introduction of microtransactions.

This essay will explore how microtransactions affect how players experience video games and will look into the question of **how 'meaning' can contribute to behavioural change in the persuasive design of video games as media.**

What are microtransactions?

In recent years, there has been a massive shift towards including broader and more diverse methods of monetization in video games. One common example of this is the inclusion of microtransactions, a business model where players can purchase virtual items through 'micropayments'. They were originally found in Free-To-Play or very cheap games as a means of generating some revenue without having too high of an entry cost.

However, publishers of games studios have observed and tested this new mode of monetization and see it as a new avenue of revenue generation after realizing that smaller payments make players more likely to spend *some* money very often, instead of *a lot* of money on rare occasions. This meant that after the entry costs to a game, if any, the player would be spending a lot more.

Currently, microtransactions can be found in every genre of game, from big studio titles to smaller indie projects. It can appear in the form of more turns in a game, in-game currency to buy cosmetic items or even blatant shortcuts to content that would historically be reserved for players that put several hours into the game.

The effects of microtransactions

Social proof and a loss of meaning

According to Cialdini (2001), social proof is the practice of influencing a person's behaviour by showing them what others in similar situations are doing. The effects of social proof on players regarding microtransactions are twofold. The ideal use of social proof according to Martin, Goldstein & Cialdini (2014, p. 13) is to "simply and honestly depict what the majority of others who are similar to your target audience are already doing that you would like your audience to do, too." As time goes on, more players will have items from later in the game or higher levels. Newer or lower leveled players will be motivated to get the same items for the prestige associated with them.

Unlocking items and progressing in video games is already a great motivator to play on its own. According to Wang & Sun (2012), "goals and game mechanics are two primary forces that drive players and provide pleasure. Short-term goals link pursuit of achievement to engagement in game mechanics, and provide a sense of control (a flow characteristic) by giving some direction about what to do next. With short-term goals, players feel accomplishment and get feedback during the course of play, which are essential to meaningful play."

Historically the situation used to be that when a player accomplished goals they would be awarded some set rewards in the form of items. These items are designed to satisfy both the players' 'material wants' and 'meaning wants' as described by Pink (2006) through the journey the player has to take to get to them.

The 'material want' drives players to work through tasks in a game to unlock the items. If a player wants new cosmetic items to customize their characters, like a new helmet, they'd be required to complete several tasks in the game that take skill, effort and perseverance. This experience is given meaning by the reward at the end, the prospect of having something that increases their status or gives them a competitive advantage. Because of this process, they end up with items that have some personal meaning to them. The other players know how much time and effort they had to put in to unlock that helmet which also gives it some meaning to other players.

When introducing microtransactions into this ecosystem, developers try to capitalize on the social proof in video games. By offering monetary shortcuts to get ahead, it devalues the items or levels other players earned through gameplay. They can't tell the difference between a player who earned his progress or a player who bought their way there.

Scarcity, reactance theory and the bloating of items

Cialdini (2001) says that people want more of something when it's scarce and according to Eisenhauer (2018) and Wikipedia contributors (2018), a form of scarcity is rarity. Rarity is something that can be seen in almost any game these days because it drives players to keep playing to get the item before it's either gone or no longer rare.

In order to create rarity amongst some items, however, a game needs to make the other items be worth less and be a lot more common. This is not usually an issue in most games unless the developers bring microtransactions into the mix. Being able to purchase rare items diminishes their value while making more common items worth even less.

Reciprocity, commitment and the grind

Reciprocity aims to influence a person by giving them smaller rewards for free at first in order to motivate them to give something back (Cialdini, 2001). If players gather lots of smaller rewards first, they'll be more inclined to spend money in the game.

Developers capitalize on this by making the smaller rewards easier to get but making the bigger rewards harder and providing monetary shortcuts to get to them.

This works because the players have already invested time in the game and have been given rewards for it. With all that time sunk in the game, players would rather get the bigger rewards than leave. Claes (2014) posits that "A player who has played a game for many hours for free will reverse-justify his use of time and equate it with money. Consciously or not, the fact that he has poured so much time into the game will make him more likely to spend money. One would imagine that the narrative would sound something like this: 'I put 10 hours into this game, and only a fool would invest so much time into a bad game, and I'm no fool, so this game must be good and therefore worth something.' "

In order to incentivize using the microtransactions, the journeys to achieve these bigger rewards are often 'artificially' lengthened. An artificially lengthened journey, also known as a 'grind' by gamers, can sometimes be taken to extremes. A prime example of this would be the 2017 game Star Wars: Battlefront 2. For reference, this game already cost €60 for the most basic edition at launch.

TheHotterPotato (2017) calculated how long it would take to unlock the six 'Hero' characters by only playing the game. His estimates put that time around 40 hours per character, equivalent to a full work week. Kamper (2017) went even further in-depth with his estimates, covering all of the unlockables in the game. He concluded that, in order to unlock all the content in the game at launch, it would require 4528 hours. That

is at least 188 days and 16 hours of non-stop gaming with no breaks for food, sleep or going to the bathroom.

The alternative to putting all these hours in would be spending money on in-game currencies. The cost to unlock everything through these means totals at \$2100. The developers had even already announced further expansions bringing more content and 'Hero' characters down the road which would balloon these costs of time or cash even further.

Conclusion

In conclusion, the three principles of persuasion by Robert Cialdini that I analyzed, Social Proof, Scarcity and Reciprocity, are a great way to provide meaning to players to get them to keep playing games. Players prefer situations where they feel like they're working towards something they value, which can be amplified through the three principles.

When microtransactions are introduced into this equation, developers need some incentives to encourage players to purchase them. When those incentives make use of the same principles there's a conflict that usually results in compromises in favor of the microtransactions. Therefore decreasing the amount of meaning derived from the normal gameplay for players that aren't interested in or unable to afford microtransactions.

Based on what I've seen I believe that 'meaning' for players is a fickle thing in video games, the smallest changes to a game's structure can make enormous impacts in the playerbase. And as recent history has shown, something as major as microtransactions should be considered very carefully.

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