

social impact games, chapter 4 provides an interesting discussion of the cultural and institutional constraints that a research environment places on a design team that fits nicely within current conversations about the difficulties associated with AAA (big budget) and Indie production. Chapters 7 and 8 get bogged down in the minutia of projects that did not work out but should still be of interest to readers intent on pursuing similar research objectives.

More attention to inclusivity and diversity in the field of social-impact games would have been a welcomed addition to the book. And there are times when Squire slips into a futurist rhetoric that focuses on where games designed for learning could be (as opposed to where games designed for learning are at). But these speculations are accompanied by frank and honest appraisals of the difficulties that his design teams faced—difficulties ranging from engaging students (chapter 3) and targeting commercial markets (chapter 7) to convincing risk-averse administrators that a game design team deserves continuous financial support (chapter 4). Overall, it is the discussion of these difficulties that makes the book stand out, especially for a broader audience interested in production histories and cultures in general.

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Free-to-Play: Mobile Video Games, Bias, and Norms

Christopher A. Paul

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2020. Introduction, conclusion, acknowledgments, notes, bibliography, and index. 512 pp. \$30.00, paper. ISBN: 9780262539418

In *Free-to-Play: Mobile Video Games, Bias, and Norms*, Christopher A Paul takes both academic game studies and lay gaming culture to task for their endemic dismissiveness of the increasingly important world of free-to-play (F2P) mobile games. Unsatisfied with game journalists' and fans' claims that F2P monetization leads inevitably to poor game design, Paul sets out to diagnose the deep-seated bias running through the heavily—but subtly—freighted evaluative norms by which gamers and reviewers elevate premium, pay-once experiences and denigrate the conspicuously feminized world of F2P gaming. Paul reveals these biases by juxtaposing core gaming culture's ostensibly rational oppositions to F2P games with its other, more credulous treatments of more familiar pay-once game objects. What emerges from the book's surprisingly diverse set of case studies is an image of F2P skepticism informed less by concerns about exploitative monetization practices or predatory marketing models as by “a bit of snobbery and gate-keeping” by an “old guard ... defensive about sharing their hobby with games they don't understand and gamers they don't recognize” (p. xxv). By “giving context to the norms and values that underlie perceptions of core gamers, journalists, developers, and game scholars” (p. xxxvi), Paul's book provides a much-needed surface on which game studies scholars can trace a more nuanced, more gradational aesthetic map to the increasingly diverse world of F2P games.

In the first half of *Free-to-Play*, comprising the book's first three chapters, Paul lays the groundwork necessary for the more comparative mode he adopts in his latter four chapters. His base is made up of quick theoretical and historical sketches intended to explode the illusion of naturalness around the pay-once commodity pricing model that many gamers laud as the ideal structure for game monetization. In this first half,

Paul runs his readers through the history of “pay-to-win” arcade design, the emergence of the three dominant F2P monetization strategies, and the strategies that core gamers use to both resist and to rationalize their spending on F2P games. In each case, Paul demonstrates that the dominant arguments against F2P monetization—that it is exploitative, that it leads to poor and imbalanced design, and that it corrupts the trust established between designer and player—often “[hang] on preferences presented as facts” (p. 34). The preferences themselves will be familiar to readers of Paul's previous *Toxic Meritocracy of Video Games*: “fairness” understood as equality rather than equity and “worth” understood as merit accrued through work and subcultural dedication.

Paul's theoretical stage set, the author then turns to his case studies to tease out the complex ideological rationalization happening behind the scenes. In chapter 5, for instance, Paul seeks to understand how some masculinized or “hard-core” F2P games like Riot's *League of Legends* or Wargaming's *World of Tanks Blitz* manage to escape the vitriol heaped upon feminized F2P games like Glu's *Kim Kardashian: Hollywood*.

Looking closely at numerous reviews

for all three games, Paul concludes that since *World of Tanks* has the same “pay-to-win” monetization that gamers claim to loathe in games like *Kim Kardashian*, gamers' aversion to F2P games is less dependent on monetization models than on the preconceived legitimacy of different game genres.

Put simply, gamers who are willing to rationalize away the potentially exploitative monetization structures in *World of Tanks*' conventional war gaming are conspicuously unwilling to advance the same generosity to fashion sims like *Kim Kardashian: Hollywood*. This obvious bias includes theming as well; in his last chapter, Paul points out that many of the critics who wrote glowing reviews of *Marvel Avengers Academy* panned the almost-identical (but feminized) *Disney Magic Kingdom* on the basis of the style alone.

As vital a corrective as *Free-to-Play* is, the book's analytical frame weakens its otherwise impressive argument. In his introduction, Paul explains that the book “is designed to help illustrate how those biases are enacted in an effort to start a credulous, nuanced criticism of free-to-play and mobile games. Articulating what is okay in mobile and free-to-play games and where the line is requires understanding these games *on their own merits*” (p. xi, emphasis mine). I agree wholeheartedly with Paul's insistence that we treat systematically overlooked phenomena in gaming culture on their own merits, including everything from ports to clone games to merchandise. But Paul never really engages with F2P games on their own terms, electing instead to focus entirely on gaming culture's terms for F2P. Two

shortcomings emerge from this decision. First, Paul's decision to focus on gamers and "core" gaming culture ironically continues to center the same perspectives that Paul claims we need to get away from.

Rather than centering the aesthetic norms and divergent cultural assumptions that he associates with the highly feminized and postcolonial players of F2P games, Paul chooses instead to talk again about the same core gamers the field has exhaustively analyzed since its inception. And second, Paul's tight focus on gaming culture means that the book wraps up without providing a more constructive alternative. Those coming to this book hoping for a toolbox of concepts with which they might develop that "credulous, nuanced criticism of free-to-play and mobile games" (p. xi) may leave feeling less well equipped than they might prefer.

Critiques notwithstanding, Paul's *Free-to-Play* remains a must read for game studies scholars or any scholars interested in the social origins of ludic aesthetics. His central argument that game studies and game culture alike have a tendency to naturalize their own assumptions should alert scholars of games and play to just how much of game culture remains hidden beneath the water. Paul rightfully argues that perhaps the biggest challenge facing game studies today is overcoming the inertia that creeps into the academy through mainstream gaming culture. Though *Free-to-Play* may be more critical than constructive at points, Paul's call for us to "map our collective blind spots" (p. xxxvi) nevertheless points a way forward for new kinds of games scholarship.

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