

Why are there so many live-service games?

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An action RPG set in a vibrant, ever-changing open world offering players intense emergent gameplay and deep character customisation. Sound familiar? Maybe because it's literally every single AAA game out there right now. Why is that so, though?

To answer this question we first need to look at what we corporate sharks call a Product Lifecycle. Basically, a product (or in this case, a video game) goes through several stages as time goes on.

THE INTRODUCTION STAGE

The game starts off great with a huge amount of players who either pre-ordered or had an early access pass. The publishers count on these people to drive their product forward and make it popular with the mass. They rely on these opinion leaders to sing praises of their game and bring in more people.

GROWTH STAGE

By this time, more and more players are buying the game and there's a healthy player count investing hours upon hours every day. Active users are rising every day and the game is getting really good engagement on social media as well.

MATURITY STAGE

The rapid growth starts dwindling at this stage as sales start declining. The game has already attained all the players it can.

There's still net positive growth, albeit very low.

DECLINE STAGE

This usually happens when you see the game being offered on stores at a huge discount. Player counts start declining at this stage. Ultimately, the player count will fall below a threshold where it's not profitable for the developers to keep supporting the title with regular updates.

WHY THIS IS AFFECTING THE GAMING INDUSTRY

If we look back to what the gaming industry was 10 years ago, we'll see that these things didn't really bother publishers or developers. Video game sales were the only thing that would bring in money. However, the rise of freemium games on mobile phones prompted this shift. AAA publishers saw that these free-to-play games, with microtransactions for boosters or cosmetics, were raking in way more revenue than anything that they could push out. These games were maintained in the typical product lifecycle management methodology. Which means that the developers want to ensure that the product stays in the growth or maturity stage in perpetuity.

So what do they do for that? They make you wait to play the game more by systematically gamifying the progression so that you feel an adrenaline rush when you pass a stage of the game. They then

lock these progression stages behind time or difficulty gates which you cannot pass without either investing a large amount of time replaying parts of the game or investing a large sum of money. So you constantly crave the satisfaction of earning better rewards and progressing, but you can't do it without constant engagement. That is what the developers want: more engagement.

This is why you'll see a large number of multiplayer games being labelled as "pay-to-win". These games force you to spend money in order to keep up with other players. Since you've already invested a lot of time into the game because how it drip-fed you rewards, you are more inclined to cough up the cash to keep it going.

And it just works. Candy Crush reported a total revenue of \$1.5 billion as of 2018. The game is free-to-download but it makes money off of microtransactions designed to speed up progress.

Progression isn't the only thing that gamers pay for. Cosmetics such as new skins for your characters in-game, or new display pictures are hot commodities for devoted gamers. Fortnite raked in \$2.4 billion in 2018 alone, the highest annual revenue of any game in history JUST out of cosmetic microtransactions.

This is why developers are moving away from making money just on the

first sale. They want to increase the amount of money that each customer pays per video game. As a result, games like Destiny 2 exist which will lock content for you if you don't buy the season pass or the latest DLC. If you do buy the DLC, you will be given access to loads of content and rewards which will trigger your dopamine levels and encourage you to keep playing.

Developers and publishers both want players to spend more time playing games. The more time you spend playing, the more likely you are to fork over cash for microtransactions. Hence, we see games like Anthem, which has microtransactions that charge you ludicrous amounts of money for mediocre cosmetics.

There are a lot of people who are taking up pitchforks against these vile practices but until there are strict policies in place worldwide which regulate these practices, we're going to be stuck with mediocre live-service games for a while. Until then, keep supporting the developers who still make proper video games where you don't have to pay more for content you already paid for.

Shahrukh Ikhtear roams the mystical plains of adulthood in search of the fabled work-life balance. Help him out with good music or just say wholesome things at fb.com/sr.ikhtear

