

Free-to-Play or Pay-to-Win?: Casual, Hardcore, and *Hearthstone*

Kenton Taylor Howard

University of Central Florida (PhD Student) / Keiser University (English Instructor)
616 Northern Oaks Ave.
DeLand, FL 32724
1-407-227-2896
khowar12@knights.ucf.edu

ABSTRACT

“Casual” and “hardcore” are commonly used descriptive terms for games and gamers. While critics have discussed these terms with regards to game design and culture, “free-to-play” games like Blizzard’s *Hearthstone* add a monetary dimension to such considerations. Players can play such games for free, but success at them often entails purchasing in-game content. These games are sometimes instead derisively referred to as “pay-to-win:” players who spend money win more often. Free-to-play games suggest that casual and hardcore depend on how much money a player spends on the game, in addition to measures like time investment or play practices. I argue that free-to-play games encourage casual players to become more hardcore by spending more money on them in addition to improving their skills at the game, using *Hearthstone* as a case study to examine the implications of the free-to-play pricing structure on both game design and game players.

Keywords

Casual Games, Hardcore Games, Free-to-Play games, Collectible Trading Card Games, *Hearthstone*.

INTRODUCTION

In *A Casual Revolution*, Jesper Juul defined the qualities of what he calls “casual games,” contrasting them with “hardcore” video games: while he noted that casual is a word with many potential meanings in terms of gaming, he argued that “simple casual games are more popular than hardcore games” (2010, 8). Casual games have redefined how games are structured and how players play them, challenging the image of gaming as a hobby for hardcore enthusiasts. The differences between casual and hardcore games and gamers are common distinctions made within gaming culture, and Juul’s description of casual games as being “simple” and “popular” mirrors the way such games are described, suggesting that they are not particularly complex, that they have a broad appeal, and that they are aimed at a wider audience beyond the “hardcore gamer.” Likewise, Chess claimed that “we can understand casual video games as those which are simple to learn and play, addictive enough that one can play them in short periods of time or for as long as time allows, and are cheap or free” (2013, 84). These descriptions of casual games recall the way the terms casual and hardcore are used to describe players: they are status-based distinctions in which casual gamers are portrayed as less seriously dedicated to the hobby than hardcore players are. Casual games have changed since these texts were written, however, and free-to-play games like Blizzard Entertainment’s *Hearthstone* (2014) have challenged the traits of casual games by adding hardcore elements to gameplay,

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raising questions about how such games, and those who play them, should be considered.

Approaches to the use of terms like casual and hardcore within gaming culture are often rhetorical, focusing on the implications of the terms. Many theorists have analyzed the rhetoric of games: for example, Paul argued that “if rhetorical analysis is a critical perspective, focusing beyond mere persuasion, all elements surrounding games are influential symbols worthy of study, as all games function persuasively” (2011). Culturally defined terms such as casual and hardcore are therefore worthy of analysis even if the rhetoric that underpins such terms is problematic. Problems with the terms often arise in relationship to gamer identity: for example, Soderman noted that the terms are frequently associated with gender, highlighting “the recent fears and anxieties expressed by the hardcore gamer community over the rise of casual games which can be linked to a distinctive gendering of the hardcore as masculine and the casual as feminine” (2009). In such respects, casual games challenge conceptions about who video games are aimed at, suggesting that many notions of gaming were originally based on a hardcore perspective that was distinctly male. Chiapello claimed that “[casual games] eclipse the video game stereotype of shooting games and the male teen player, and reintroduce games as accessible for all audiences” (2014). Casual games therefore expand the notion of gamer identity because they are played by people other than the traditionally male hardcore gamer. In these respects, the popularity of casual games seems to come from the fact that they have extended gaming to people who were not seen as the target audience of video games.

Since casual games are popular with wider audiences, game designers have tried to develop games that appeal to those audiences. Chiapello noted that “the casual game phenomenon is widely acknowledged in the game design profession” (2014): the word “phenomenon” implies that casual games have redefined the ways that game designers create games. Casual games are often designed to be played on mobile devices and for short periods of time, which leads to casual games being considered trivial in comparison to their hardcore counterparts. Players can get quite deeply involved in casual games, however: Hajinejad et. al. argued that “casual games are not only games fitting into the gaps of everyday life” (2011), and many casual gamers play such games in a serious, hardcore way. Such elements blur the line between whether a game or player can be called casual or hardcore. These authors all highlighted slippage between definitions of casual and hardcore with regards to video games, especially with regards to audience and design, suggesting that distinctions between the two terms are complicated. The definitions of the terms deploy across a variety of other areas related to games as well, and Paavilainen et. al. summarized the situation nicely: “casual is not a simple list of properties of a game. The phenomenon is an answer to a specific transformation of game cultures, forming a set of design values that correspond to these changes” (2009). Since the terms are frequently used in discussions of game design and game players, the implications of the terms in those areas should be considered.

While factors such as rhetoric, audience, design, and are all useful elements to consider when discussing the terms casual and hardcore with respect to games, I focus here on the pricing structure used in free-to-play games. Shaw claimed that “we should also look at the dominant meanings encoded in the texts [players] are playing” (2010, 11), which means that the implications of the economic models built into free-to-play games like *Hearthstone* should be analyzed. The free-to-play purchasing model adds a monetary dimension to casual games that is important to consider. I argue that free-to-play casual games are structured in a way that promotes hardcore gameplay – and by extension, hardcore spending – encouraging casual players to

spend more on the game in addition to improving their skills. Given the implications of terms like casual and hardcore for both game design and gamer identity, this structure is problematic, suggesting that those with more money to spend on a game can more easily become a hardcore player. In this paper, I use *Hearthstone* as a case study to demonstrate the effects of this monetization model, illustrating the ways that money impacts casual and hardcore game design and gamer identity in free-to-play games. This impact can be seen in the pricing structure of the game, the ways that spending more on the game makes it more fun, the connection between money and time commitments required to play the game and finally in the ways that players engage with gameplay elements based on both time and monetary constraints. To demonstrate this impact, I analyze the pricing, reward and ranking structures of the game, which I have played since its open beta in January 2014. I also use player-created paratexts such as game guides, discussions about the game on fan forums and gaming news coverage of the game to illustrate how these elements are portrayed in gaming culture.

FREE-TO-PLAY COLLECTIBLE CARD GAMES

Many casual games are now offered to users for free. These free-to-play games rely on “microtransactions,” in which players purchase game-related content for a small fee. The model is very economically successful, and it has been adopted by many game publishers, becoming one of the most common pricing structures in the gaming industry for casual mobile games. The success of this model led Blizzard Entertainment, one of the largest game developers in the industry, to experiment with microtransactions by forming a team to create a free-to-play game based on their popular *World of Warcraft* franchise. The resulting game, *Hearthstone* began as a PC game before being ported to tablets and mobile phones, moves that expanded the game’s player base by making it easier to play casually.

Hearthstone has become one of the most popular games in the free-to-play genre: a press release by Blizzard from May 2017 noted that the game had more than 70 million registered accounts (Campbell). It is also one of the most profitable: public figures released by an analyst firm in 2017 suggest that the game makes more than 25 million dollars a month (Minotti). *Hearthstone* is one of the biggest free-to-play games in the industry, particularly within the genre of digital collectible trading card games. Because of *Hearthstone*’s success, many other game companies have followed suit, and the collectible card game genre itself has become a large subset of the free-to-play market. Companies usually known for creating engrossing games that take hundreds of hours to play created casual free-to-play card games out of gaming franchises that would usually be described as hardcore, such as *The Elder Scrolls* or *The Witcher*. In many cases, free-to-play games introduced these franchises to casual players who had never experienced them before.

Many of the genre conventions of these digital collectible card games are similar: in *Hearthstone*, as in most such games, players construct decks out of cards to battle one another. While *Hearthstone* offers some introductory cards to players completely for free, most of the game’s cards are obtained through randomized card packs that must be purchased with real-life money or in-game currency. Cards are sorted into rarity levels – “common,” “rare,” “epic,” and “legendary” (Blizzard 2014) – that roughly correspond to increasing levels of power, though power levels between cards and rarities can vary wildly. Players have a general idea of what cards could potentially be in a pack, as well as their chances are of obtaining higher rarity cards, but do not find out what cards are inside until the pack is virtually opened. These card packs are sorted into expansions that are periodically released over time.

The digital card pack format described above is similar to purchasing a physical pack of cards for a collectible card game like *Magic: The Gathering* or *Pokémon*; however, it is worth noting the differences between the two. Players cannot trade cards with one another in *Hearthstone* as they can in real life, which was a deliberate design choice made to avoid high prices for desirable cards: in an interview at Gamescom in 2013 before the release of the game, executive producer Hamilton Chu commented “We decided to go away from that” with regards to card trading (Goldfarb 2013). Instead, *Hearthstone* players can use their old or duplicate cards to create a certain amount of “arcane dust” (Blizzard 2014) that can be used to craft any card the player chooses of a lesser rarity. While the inability to trade cards in *Hearthstone* is presented as an advantage to casual players, it also means that a player who is no longer interested in the game cannot sell his or her card collection to recoup some of the money the player invested in the game, as players of a physical card game like *Magic* can. It is also worth noting that *Hearthstone* cards are not static as real-life cards are: Blizzard occasionally updates problem cards to reduce their power level, and has created a special “Standard” (Blizzard 2014) format that only allows players to use newer cards in order to alleviate concerns about how difficult it is for newer players to compete against longtime players with large card collections. While these updates are presented as an advantage to keep the game fresh, they can be problematic for casual players who take long breaks from the game, as their old cards could be changed or unusable in many gameplay formats, requiring them to purchase new cards.

As in many other free-to-play games, *Hearthstone* players can obtain in-game currency that they can use to purchase card packs. Obtaining such currency can be time consuming, however, so most free-to-play games offer an alternative: purchasing content outright with real-life money. This pricing structure adds a significant economic element to considerations of casual and hardcore in free-to-play games, as hardcore players who spend more money on the game will have access to more content. The free-to-play model makes these games appealing to casual players when compared to their physical equivalents like *Magic* because casual players never have to purchase content and can spend as little or as much as desired. In practice, however, players who want to succeed at free-to-play games like *Hearthstone* will probably need to purchase cards, as in-game currency acquired faster through winning games or completing challenges in the game, and a larger collection of cards allows players to build more successful decks that win more frequently. Therefore, games such as these are sometimes derisively referred to as “pay to win” (Secant 2017), a term that comes up often in discussion threads about *Hearthstone*. The pricing structure ensures that players who purchase content win more often because they have access to better options than players who have not spent money on content. Unlike a traditional game that players purchase and then play indefinitely, free-to-play games instead encourage players to periodically purchase new content, constantly pressuring casual players to spend more and suggesting that those who do are more hardcore players.

By relying on a free-to-play pricing structure, games like *Hearthstone* add an economic dimension to gameplay. The ways people spend money in such games help to define casual and hardcore players: casual players spend less money on the game, while hardcore players spend more. Similarly, the line between casual and hardcore games can be drawn based on how much the game incentivizes purchasing content with real-life money: in other words, the more hardcore a game is, the more likely it is to employ a “pay-to-win” philosophy by giving gameplay advantages to players that pay for content. Most digital collectible card games like *Hearthstone* have a variable position on this spectrum because players purchase randomized content. In theory, a lucky player might get the content he or she wants very quickly and will

therefore not have to spend much money. In practice, there will almost always be some content that a player does not have unless he or she spends significant amounts of money or time on the game to acquire all of it, and the periodical release of new content adds more opportunities for spending to the game over time. Randomization helps to alleviate some of a game's pay-to-win problems, however: in *Hearthstone*, for example, a player who spends more on the game might have more cards, but is not necessarily guaranteed to have better cards, and cannot simply purchase specific powerful cards outright as they can in an physical card game like *Magic*.

Overall, *Hearthstone*'s randomness helps to alleviate some of the problems that show up in other free-to-play games, which often offer players the ability to purchase direct gameplay advantages, such as more experience points or damage bonuses. These elements might account for *Hearthstone*'s success as a casual game: *Hearthstone*'s popularity could be based on the game being less aggressively "pay-to-win" than other games. That being said, many critics have pointed out that the game has become more expensive over time: Friedman wrote an article titled "*Hearthstone* Has Become a \$400 a Year Game" and analyzed how the game's pricing structure has changed since it was released, estimating that current *Hearthstone* players would likely need to spend much more in order to get most of the cards released during a given year (2017). His analysis was based on assuming that such players would want to have access to most of the game's cards in order to build competitive decks, and he pointed out that "you don't have to chase every card, but the game is still aimed at making sure you spend more money than you have in the past" (Friedman 2017). While his assumption may only be true for hardcore players who want access to most of the game's cards, the game is structured in a way that encourages casual players to spend more. Spending money on a free-to-play game therefore allows a player to be more competitive against others, pushing them to become less of a casual player. In addition, spending money on the game gives the player access to more cards, which makes it more fun to play.

FREE-TO-PLAY GAMES AND FUN

As noted above, access to all of *Hearthstone*'s content is not required to play the game or to be competitive in it, offering casual players a way to play the game without a hardcore monetary investment. Access to more content makes a player's game experience better because it offers more variety, however, such that something as simple as fun is impacted by the pricing structure of free-to-play games. Koster argued that "when you're playing a game, you'll only play it until you master the pattern; once you've mastered it, the game becomes boring" (2004, 14 – 18). As noted earlier, randomness is also a key part of the free-to-play monetization model, a trait that also significantly contributes to fun in casual games. Juul pointed out that most casual games are simple and do not take hundreds of hours to complete as hardcore games do, so they often use randomness to reduce the boredom of players. Juul described replayability as a way that casual games stay entertaining despite their simplicity, using Solitaire as an example (2010, 78). *Hearthstone* shares this trait but differs from Solitaire because players construct multiple different decks to play with out of their library of available cards. Therefore, deckbuilding is an important aspect of the game's fun: access to new and different cards helps to keep players from getting bored, which incentivizes spending more on the game to get access to more cards.

Hearthstone also differs from Solitaire because it is a multiplayer game, so a player's deckbuilding choices are not made in a vacuum: the player builds his or her deck knowing that it will be tested against opposing decks, and a player's fun is often linked to how successful that deck is. These decks, and the decks a player's opponent

uses, make up the patterns of *Hearthstone*, and are referred to as the game's "metagame," a term coined by Richard Garfield in reference to a similar situation in *Magic: The Gathering* (Carter et. al. 2012). While players are free to make a deck out of any cards in his or her collection, the cards in *Hearthstone* are not all equal in terms of power or usefulness. The hardcore *Hearthstone* community analyzes the game's expansions for cards that are more powerful than others and constructs "decklists" out of them, which are usually shared online: for example, one site claims to list "all of the currently viable decks" for a particular class (LOrinda 2018). A casual player with few cards can only build a few of these decks, such that he or she will master the pattern of those decks quickly and may get bored of them, especially if the decks are not very successful. Hardcore players with lots of cards instead tend to gravitate toward established deck types, creating a metagame that often has specific, recognizable decklists such as the ones noted above. While there are players who have fun by avoiding these standardized decks in favor of their own creations, such decks are rarely successful: if they are, hardcore players quickly adopt those decklists, such that even off-beat decks end up becoming part of the metagame. The metagame therefore structures the fun of playing *Hearthstone*: it determines many of the player's deckbuilding and gameplay choices, especially if they are serious about being competitive in the game.

The factors described above mean that access to more cards makes *Hearthstone* more fun, since a player with more cards can build a larger variety of decks. As such, *Hearthstone's* pricing structure incentivizes purchasing more content in multiple ways: having more cards allows a player to have more fun playing, encourages the player to be competitive and makes the player more of a hardcore player. As mentioned earlier, *Hearthstone* is also periodically updated with new cards: these updates keep the game from getting boring by introducing new cards and therefore new patterns into the metagame. The updates also mean that a player must continuously purchase new content to have fun and be competitive against other players. These elements add an economic factor to *Hearthstone's* fun because the game becomes less boring when the player spends more money on it, such that over time, players might find themselves spending many times the amount they would normally spend a video game. For the game's more casual players, those factors also contribute to the player's time investment into the game, since acquiring in-game currency allows a player to purchase more cards, have more fun and be more competitive.

CASUAL GAMES AND TIME INVESTMENT

Juul argued that another key component of casual games is their flexibility: casual games do not require a significant time investment, but hardcore games do. He claimed that "a casual game is sufficiently flexible to be played with a hardcore time commitment, but a hardcore game is too inflexible to be played with a casual time commitment" (Juul 2010, 12). Therefore, one way of defining the differences between casual and hardcore games is through the game's time requirements: a casual game is structured so that it does not require much time to play and allows a player flexibility with how he or she spends that time. Likewise, Shaw pointed out that "video game culture is also defined in terms of the amount of time people spend doing it" (2010, 9), suggesting that the image of the hardcore gamer is typically one who spends a great deal of time playing the game. These viewpoints suggest that a casual or hardcore game is often defined in terms of how little time it requires of its players, and that a casual or hardcore player can be defined by how much time he or she spends playing a game.

Free-to-play casual games like *Hearthstone* challenge the notion of the distinction between the quick casual game and the time-consuming hardcore game, as well as the notions about the time investment required from players in such games. In *Hearthstone*, the game's "quest" (Blizzard 2014) system offers objectives for the player to complete for an in-game currency reward: for example, a quest might require a player to win three games or to use certain kinds of cards. This design might sound flexible because players can simply not complete these quests if they would rather not invest the time required to do so; however, since the pricing structure of free-to-play games implies that distinctions between casual and hardcore are partly based on how much money a player has spent on the game, *Hearthstone* encourages a significant time commitment from casual players. Players are given one quest every 24 hours, and they have a "quest log" (Blizzard 2014) that can store up to three quests at a time, but once this quest log is full, any new quests are lost. Quests can also be "rerolled" (Blizzard 2014) once a day, which gives the chance of granting a different quest instead. Since the quests award varying amounts of in-game currency, a casual player who wants to maximize the value of his or her quest rewards will typically try to reroll less valuable quests in the hopes of getting more rewarding ones. The structure of *Hearthstone's* quest system therefore means that casual players who would rather spend in-game currency than real life money on the game must invest significant amounts of time optimizing their management of the system. Since there are a maximum number of quests that can be stored, casual players are encouraged to complete at least one quest every day, and since some quests have better rewards than others, those players are also encouraged to reroll a quest every day to optimize their rewards. The result is that *Hearthstone* pressures casual players to play the game and complete quests every day to get as much in-game currency as possible, while hardcore players can simply spend real-life money on the game instead, avoiding the time commitment necessary to complete the game's daily quests.

In free-to-play games, a casual player's time is more committed than a hardcore player's unless the player spends money to avoid those time investments, making the player more of a hardcore player in the process. These daily quest models are popular in many free-to-play games and optimizing in-game currency rewards is so important to casual players that there are numerous online guides aimed at offering advice on how to maximize them. One *Hearthstone* guide claims that "you will end up spending far less money in the long run if you understand how to properly manage your in-game resources" (Aleco 2017), suggesting that a great deal of a casual *Hearthstone* player's time is spent trying to complete these quests to save themselves money. Because casual free-to-play games use a reward structure that provides players with currency, time investment is directly tied to the game's pricing structure. Since hardcore players have spent a great deal of money on the game, such players have little incentive to complete these quests than casual players, because they have no need for in-game currency. In the case of *Hearthstone*, hardcore players are more likely to have spent money on the game to get the cards they want, and therefore are less likely to need the in-game currency offered by the game's daily quests. *Hearthstone's* hardcore players often ignore the game's quest system entirely, as they have no reason to spend their time completing those quests. The game's casual players, on the other hand, have a large incentive to try to maximize the currency they gain from quests: since they spend less real-life money on the game, quests provide the in-game currency need to get access to more cards.

While hardcore players likely play more than casual players because they are more invested in gaming as a hobby, free-to-play games like *Hearthstone* challenge Juul's notion of flexibility in casual games because the time hardcore players spend in the game is less committed. In *Hearthstone*, casual players must play daily to keep up with their quests, while hardcore players do not have such concerns. Both types of

players might invest a great deal of time in the game, but hardcore players actually have more freedom with how they spend their in-game time, and they focus more on the game's ranked play system and competitive tournament scene, where success offers minimal in-game currency rewards but confers hardcore status in *Hearthstone's* gaming community. Since the game's ranked play mode is more skill intensive as well, casual players often avoid that game mode; in fact, the game offers another unranked mode that is specifically referred to as "casual play" (Blizzard 2014). This distinction between game modes suggests that the ranked play mode is considered the game's more hardcore play mode by the game's designers themselves as well. The distinction is also problematic because it creates a connection between perceived player status and how much they spend on the game: ranked players are usually seen as more skilled and therefore more hardcore, but they have also likely spent money to get the cards necessary to build a competitive deck. Casual players are considered less skilled, but they simply have not invested the time or money necessary to build a competitive deck. These factors mean that the economic elements that impact casual and hardcore in free-to-play games are not only influenced by how much time a player spends playing: it is also important to consider spending in relation to how players spend their time in the game. In free-to-play games, how much a player spends on the game determines how he or she plays it, which likewise determines the player's status as casual or hardcore. In *Hearthstone*, such differences can be observed through play practices in the game's ranked play mode and in its competitive tournament scene.

CASUAL AND hardcore PLAY PRACTICES

Differences in casual and hardcore play practices can be seen in the way players engage with *Hearthstone's* daily quests and advancement systems when compared to other games, as well as in how those systems are structured. These differences imply that it is important to look how players spend their time in free-to-play games in addition to looking at how much time players spend playing them or how much time the games require to play, since play practices themselves are influenced by the game's pricing structure. Shaw pointed out that "gaming can be, and has been, studied in terms of play practices" (2010, 9), arguing that how players play games is an important paradigm for studying them. In many games, how a player spends his or her time determines whether that player is casual or hardcore, and in free-to-play games, the pricing structure and game design both contribute to casual or hardcore play practices.

The ways a video game structures rewards and advancement are often main factors in determining a player's play practices: for example, in hardcore games like *World of Warcraft*, daily quests are time-consuming endeavors that are usually undertaken by the game's most hardcore players. In hardcore games, daily quests offer a specialized set of objectives designed for players who already spend a great deal of time playing and are therefore aimed creating a continuous path of advancement that provides a reward structure for hardcore players. In free-to-play games like *Hearthstone*, however, daily quests are not part of the game's advancement system, since the only reward for completing them is in-game currency; these quests are instead aimed at the game's most casual of players in the hopes of getting them to play more often. In fact, since the amount of in-game currency that a player can obtain is capped and there is a limited amount of content to spend it on, *Hearthstone's* most hardcore players ignore these daily quests entirely, since as mentioned above, those players have spent enough money on the game to have all the content they want.

Rather than being tied to daily objectives and reward systems, a player's casual or hardcore status in *Hearthstone* is instead tied to the player's success in hardcore

spaces such as the game's ranked play mode. While the game's ranked play mode offers rewards for achieving certain ranks, these rewards are given out on a monthly basis and are quite minimal in comparison to the rewards given by the quest system. The game mode is instead intended for hardcore players who are interested in testing their skills against others, and success in it is seen as a status symbol in the *Hearthstone* community: Blizzard often releases news updates detailing the top ranked players from each month (Blizzard Entertainment 2018). In competitive free-to-play games like *Hearthstone* advancement is measured differently than in games like *World of Warcraft*: hardcore *Hearthstone* players focus on the game's rank-based advancement system, as well as specialized organized tournaments with specific rules that are held outside of the game's ranked play structure.

Hearthstone's ranked play mode consists of 25 in-game ranks that a player advances through as he or she plays each month: winning a certain number of games increases a player's rank, while losing a certain number decreases it. A player's rank is reduced at the beginning of each month, meaning that consistently achieving a high ranking in the game's ranked play mode often requires the kind of hardcore time investment that Juul discussed unless a player is extremely successful in ranked play. Once a player has reached rank 1, the player can advance to "legend" (Blizzard 2014) rank, a specialized ranking system for the best players that provides a direct numerical ranking of the player's status against other legend players within their region. Consistently reaching legend rank is one of the main markers of a hardcore *Hearthstone* player within the community. While gameplay skill is usually seen as the most significant determining factor of a player's ability to reach legend rank, there is a monetary factor to reaching legend rank as well: a player must have access to enough cards to build an effective deck that can win consistently, something that is very difficult to do with a limited set of cards. There is also a time investment element to achieving legend rank: while Blizzard has updated the ranked mode over the years, fans typically estimate that players will need to win hundreds of games to reach legend rank (Berry 2017). These factors suggest that gameplay skill is tied to money and time investment in these games: while a player might be good at the game to achieve the legend rank, he or she also needs to have the cards necessary to build decks that can reach that rank.

Consistently achieving legend status in the game's ranked play mode also often gets players invited to special invitation only *Hearthstone* tournaments, the largest of which are sponsored by Blizzard themselves. These tournaments form the backbone of the game's "competitive scene," and each year, the best *Hearthstone* players compete at a worldwide tournament to crown a world champion. As in many other collectible card games, *Hearthstone* tournaments are typically seen as the pinnacle of competitive play: there are even "professional" *Hearthstone* players who make a living by competing in these tournaments and winning prize money, and fan websites that rank the players by earnings and tournament success (GosuGamers 2018). Professional player income is often supplemented by such players streaming their in-game playtime through services such as Twitch T.V., as *Hearthstone* streams and tournaments tend to be some of the most popular content on the service. These factors combine to create an interesting reversal of the game's economic structure: the most hardcore of *Hearthstone*'s players often achieve a kind of celebrity status in the community and are even able to make significant profits off of their Twitch streams and tournament winnings. While this description only applies to a small, especially hardcore percentage of *Hearthstone* players, it also represents perhaps the most extreme example of the economic implications of free-to-play game structures: the game's most hardcore and skilled players have invested so much time and money into the game that can see a return on their money if they make an effort to successfully monetize their playtime.

CONCLUSION

Taken in total, these factors suggest that, in free to play games, a hardcore player has the following qualities: the player spends a great deal of time playing the game to increase his or her in-game status; the player spends a great deal of money on the game to get access to game content so that he or she can be more competitive; and if he or she is truly hardcore, the player might even become a kind of hardcore celebrity at playing the game. Similarly, a casual free-to-play gamer also spends a great deal of time playing the game, but the casual player's time is spent optimizing the value of his or her in game rewards so that he or she does not have to spend money on the game and in the hopes that he or she might eventually get access to enough content to be competitive in the game and become one of the hardcore players described above. On the other hand, determining the qualities of a casual or hardcore game is more challenging because many casual games encourage hardcore spending, time investment, and play practices. The monetary factor is particularly problematic in such games because it is so closely linked to status and identity: a player needs enough content to be competitive if he or she wants to be hardcore, and spending money is the fastest and easiest way to get that content, suggesting that players should do that instead of improving their gameplay skills.

These factors therefore complicate notions of casual and hardcore in free-to-play games. Complicating the issue further is that time, economics, and status are all linked in free-to-play games: spending money on the game allows players to spend their time on hardcore elements of the game, such as its ranking system or competitive tournaments, while not doing so means players will instead need to spend time gaining in-game currency in order to become more hardcore. This is problematic because gameplay is often separated by the terms casual and hardcore by both the gaming community and game developers. In free-to-play games, access to hardcore elements is often restricted by player's ability to pay for content or invest time into the game, suggesting that those who do not have the time or money to spend are casual players. Considering that casual games and players are often portrayed negatively, this linkage between time, money, and status in free-to-play games like *Hearthstone* is problematic.

The economic aspects of free-to-play casual games also open new avenues of analysis for the future. In particular, analyses of the capitalistic elements of this monetization methods would be particularly valuable, and, as noted earlier, some gaming journalists have already highlighted the exploitative nature of this pricing structure. The influence of the free-to-play pricing structure on non-digital games has also been noted (Maisenholder, 2018), suggesting that it may impact all kinds of games as well. Since this method of pricing has become particularly popular with casual mobile games, which have greatly expanded the gaming audience in general, it is unlikely to go away any time soon, and further critical analysis of it could therefore be quite useful. While I have focused primarily here on structural analysis of one of the most popular free-to-play games in the industry, the implications of this pricing model, especially in games that are more aggressively "pay-to-win" than *Hearthstone*, might be analyzed from Marxist or cultural perspectives that could draw out many other problematic elements inherent in such an aggressively capitalistic monetization structure. One troubling aspect of such games is that players with more disposable income and time are more likely to succeed than players who do not. This element of free-to-play-games suggests that the constant pressure to spend money and become more hardcore that I highlight here reflects some of the larger problematic issues in capitalistic societies that link social status to money, and further work in this area could be especially useful.

It is not surprising that free-to-play games like *Hearthstone* complicate terms like casual and hardcore, since the game is part of a genre that has exploded in popularity and has generated a great deal of discussion about casual game designers and casual gamers. While that model has also been criticized – as noted earlier, a common negative descriptive term for these games is that they are pay-to-win instead of free-to-play – it has also come to dominate the mobile game industry. These factors suggest that one useful way to consider a free-to-play game is to examine the implications of its economic structure and reward systems, and that players can be evaluated based on how much money they spend on a game, as well as how they spend their time playing it.

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