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The Culture Industries

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1 December, 2025

The Hidden Labor of Watching Ads in Free Mobile Games

I remember the first thing I did when I got an iPad Mini for Christmas: download as many games as possible. Like most children, getting an iPad meant I finally had free rein over my screen time, rather than having to ask my parents for their phone or devices. As I got older, this need went away, but obviously, the escape and joy of random mobile games were still present. Getting older meant that something became more prevalent within the nature of these free mobile games; whether that means I grew up and started to take more notice, or the games just started to advertise more, but free-to-play games advertise a lot. These advertisements come in various formats, most famously in 30-second to 60-second pop-up ads. It's a fascinating concept: playing a free mobile game, completing levels, and wanting to continue, only to be stopped by an unavoidable pop-up ad that cannot be exited and offers no reward. In many free-to-play (F2P) mobile games, there are options to voluntarily watch ads for in-game rewards, whether that be in-game currency (gems, diamonds, etc.), free power-ups, or clues. Still, in more recent years, pop-up ads have become constant, unavoidable, annoying, and, more importantly, give no reward to players. Sure, this is obviously used to make money for the game and its advertisers, but what's the point if players can watch ads for rewards anyway? It's just a waste of time. Especially since it would entice players to watch more ads for rewards if they weren't constantly bombarded with said ads. There is a hidden labor within the free-to-play mobile game space: players who watch ads for "free," with no reward. Though framed as part of the games'

leisure, this ad-watching generates revenue and data, turning players' attention into unpaid digital labor. Players think that ad-watching is just part of the in-game experience, making it an unrecognized and hidden labor within the F2P world. If there is already an option for watching ads and earning in-game rewards, why can't that be the norm? Why must F2P games, which people download for numerous reasons, including the fact that they're free to play, be forced to generate revenue and data without any reward?

Looking through a mass culture lens, especially with analysis from Adorno and Horkheimer's *"The Culture Industry: Enlightenment as Mass Deception"*, in which they criticize entertainment as a system that manufactures pleasure while disciplining consumers. The exact phenomenon that F2P game developers have manipulated players into. In Adorno and Horkheimer's analysis, "pleasure in mass culture is not real freedom or satisfaction and instead a form of managed amusement that keeps people attached to the very system that exploits them" (116). They believe the culture sphere has "stripped" amusement of intrinsic meaning, as a means to improve the commodities it sells (107), which is exactly what the gaming industry has done to free games and their players. The amusement and entertainment of free games are gone when they are constantly interrupted by ads that make the experience feel like a chore and become unenjoyable. The context of this labor is simple: "the quality of organized amusement is converted into the quality of organized cruelty" (110), and that what it is, its cruel to force players to participate in the invisible and undeniable labor of watching ads, which generates money for a larger company, while leaving players angry, bored, and ultimately becomes pointless in the end, when the game is deleted. The culture industries can mean many things and encompass a wide range of media. One thing the culture industries do as a whole is commodify amusement. It's hard to define unrecognized labor when it is so normalized. Ads in free mobile

games aren't really questioned, because obviously, the game has to make money somehow. That is not necessarily what is being argued; what is being questioned is the illusion of free mobile games, aka, not paying to play, when in reality, players are paying with their time, which is actively watching ads that directly translates to revenue to the developers. This is a form of labor, so pointedly in the gaming industry, that is normalized to the point of overexhaustion. It is one thing to have a few ads to make money, but there comes a point when there is oversaturation of ads, especially ones that take up the entire screen, require you to play them to exit, or even make you watch 30 to 60 seconds of a video to exit. It is time for a change, for this labor to be recognized and for a solution for mobile game players.

Free-to-play mobile games should be enjoyable for everyone without the constant annoyance of in-game ads, but what appears to be simple leisure is, in reality, structured by systems of hidden labor. Scholars of digital media have shown that the activities users engage in for enjoyment are increasingly entangled with unpaid work, especially on advertising-driven platforms. In the case of F2P games, this labor takes the form of attention, data generation, and forced ad-watching, activities players rarely recognize as productive (unless, of course, incentivized by in-game rewards). What is interesting is that watching rewarded video ads actually improves user retention and drives ad revenue for the game directly (Ads). The mobile games industry itself generates over \$30 billion in global revenue (Nieborg, 29), and ads account for 14 percent of revenue (Civelek, 259). Many popular mobile games, such as Clash of Clans, Hay Day, and Candy Crush Saga, can rely less on ads because their players use real money to make in-game purchases (Nieborg, 29). There is a notable imbalance between players and those who also pay. Plus, popular mobile games have the money to not constantly show ads, but what happens to the ones that don't? Those are the ones that show ads non-stop. Nieborg defines "user

aquisition" as "a form of mobile marketing [that] raises important critical questions about the emergence of mobile platform-based advertising, the position of players, their data and, in the end, their play" (28), which is bad news for players as, those less popular F2P games must generate revenue somehow, which why these ads are becoming a constant to not only generate revenue but collecting user-ad data, and funding the entire game.

User attention is a recurring theme in the gaming world because, without it, there would be no gaming industry. User attention is important, it's obviously not a good thing when a user gets annoyed frequently, especially at advertisements. Players want to have good experiences within a game, especially a free one. Discussed in *Videogames-as-a-Service: Converting Freemium- to Paying-Users through Pop-up Advertisement Value*, author Ali Hussian (et. al) talks about "ad-related irritation," as it describes how annoyed consumers are with ads (402), which obviously leads to negative experiences. Users are literally left unhappy, annoyed, and most importantly their gameplay was interrupted, and their attention (which is so valuable) was distracted. It's almost like ads are creating bad PR for all free-to-play mobile games, "a negative association exists between online videogaming-based pop-up ad irritation and its advertising value" (402). This is why it's important to have in-game, ad-related incentives. Research has even been conducted to prove that consumers exposed to "incentive-offering ads tend to be significantly more responsive...than their nonincentivized counterparts" (402). It is important that this remains a priority, especially when the entire gaming economy essentially profits off of user attention. There can't even be interaction with in-game ads without attention. The solution is simple, "[in-game] incentives can be provided in various forms, including by permitting players' advancement to the next in-game level, or through free virtual resources (e.g., weapons/tools, outfits/avatars, maps, vehicles) that facilitate game-related task accomplishment..." (402), which

means that a positive association will improve between ads and players because pop-up ads have incentives and rewards, not just gaining value for the developer, but for the user too. Obviously, getting rid of ads completely is unavoidable, because it's true, that's what makes the money. All I propose is that with every ad, there be an in-game reward, so this hidden labor of "watching ads because we have to" is erased and compensated within the game. Interestingly enough, a group of professional Finnish gamers was interviewed about their opinions on the F2P market. Some players discussed much opposition to the unethical side of F2P gaming (gambling, etc), in addition to having mixed feelings about the oversaturation and negativity in the market. Much discussion and outrage online directly criticizes the F2P revenue model (Alha, 5), crediting the "negative attitudes" to "the history of F2P games— early F2P games were aggressive in their monetization and shallow in their gameplay...something that has had a permanent impact and given a certain type of stigma to the whole F2P industry that still has not faded...the sheer amount of poorly designed and aggressively monetized games still around" (Alha, 5). It is almost funny that even professional gamers believe aggressive monetization and constant ad runs are ruining free-to-play games.

The idea of free-to-play games is enticing. The general concept seems appealing: a free game with the option to make real in-game purchases and total control over the experience. Except that experience is hindered by running pop-up ads non-stop. While not the same thing, virtual game currency plays a big role in the enjoyment of games. Obviously, most users who play free games will keep them free and not spend anything. Still, part of the control is the option to purchase. "...experiences subsequently affected their intention to purchase virtual products...online game players and found that online game story, graphics, length, and control are highly related to enjoyment" (Civelek, 262). The point is that free mobile games are

supposed to be fun, no matter how one participates in or interacts with them, and ads undermine that very point. Yes, a F2P game is free to download. Still, the user should not be wasting their time and attention on a low-quality game that is mostly ads, or be manipulated into the idea that to get rid of said ads or to avoid them, is to spend real money, which then is the opposite of the “free” game model.

To further test and expand on my argument, I designed a survey to analyze the real-time effects and opinions of my peers who actively play F2P games. The survey consisted of 13 questions, including a mix of Yes/No, Very Often to Never (scale), and free-response questions. The first question I asked was “How often do you play free mobile games?” In which over 50% of respondents said they do. I was curious to know which actual games they played, and the results were extremely interesting. I noticed a mix of games, like Fortnite, and others like Solitaire or Chess. Of course, some popular games showed up, like Subway Surfers and Clash Royale, but I noticed that, because the F2P market is so oversaturated, the range of responses was vast. For reference, “the mobile games industry is continuing to grow rapidly, and it will take a share of 42% of the whole game market by the end of 2017, generating 46.1 billion dollars...” with dominant players being both Apple Apps and Google Play” (Goncharova, 5). Specifically, five games given (Chess, Duolingo, Solitaire, Sudoku, Word Association) were more learning and mind-provoking focused, where as there were five “traditional” F2P games mentioned (Subway Surfer, Doodle Jump, Hay Day, Clash of Clans, Clash Royale), and four games, which shocked me, but got me thinking about the actual translation of gaming and media, (Fortnite, Pokemon Go, Magic: The Gathering Arena, Transformers Earth Wars). These games particularly interested me because they did not start in the free-to-play market. Fortnite, for example, was originally a console or PC-only game; on both platforms, the game costs real

money to purchase, yet the mobile app version is free to download. Games like Pokémon Go and Magic: The Gathering were originally forms of other media (specifically, a trading card game) that were later translated into TV shows, but, again, did not start as free mobile games.

Transformers was also another form of physical media (action figures, comics, TV show) that typically would cost money to participate in. I bring this up to draw similarities to Jameson's text on commodification. This shift from paid, physical, or console-based formats to "free" mobile versions reflects exactly what Jameson describes as capitalism's drive to absorb every cultural object into new circuits of commodification, further emphasizing the issue in the F2P market. Games like this are almost the opposite, to the point where the thing already made for mass production and commodification is produced in another format under the illusion of "free," only to generate constant revenue for the industry and company while annoying its users. Jameson's critique of late capitalism helps explain why the "free" pleasure of mobile gaming becomes a space of hidden labor. Jameson argues that modern capitalism no longer limits itself to traditional economic spheres but expands into every corner of everyday life, even those once considered private, emotional, or leisurely. As he writes, late capitalism involves "a prodigious expansion of capital into hitherto uncommodified areas... capitalism of our own time thus eliminates the enclaves of precapitalist organization it had hitherto tolerated and exploited in a tributary way: one is tempted to speak in this connection of a new and historically original penetration and colonization of Nature and the Unconscious... and the rise of the media and the advertising industry" (78). This "colonization of the unconscious" is exactly what happens in free-to-play mobile games. What appears to be harmless entertainment becomes an economic extraction zone in which players' time and attention are turned into profit. The forced ads, constant interruptions, and pressure to watch in exchange for continued play demonstrate how even relaxation becomes

a monetized activity. In other words, Jameson's theory shows that ad-watching in F2P games isn't just annoying but is a direct example of capitalism turning leisure into unpaid, unrecognized labor. It's interesting how this commodification is transferring from one form of media to another, and now this labor is forced upon its users.

I asked the question (in the survey) of when players got ads, and the majority of the answers were always after completing a level. Most respondents also said pop-up video ads were the most common ones they received, lasting anywhere from ten seconds to more than a minute. I was curious about what my peers thought of being forced to watch ads in a free game without an in-game reward, and asked whether it was fair. With the general consensus being no, some people explained that ads can be "disruptive to players," "annoying," "it wastes time," with other users sympathizing, and understanding the need to create revenue still, one response said "it is not fair to the user to watch all of these ads...they make you play whole game and wait thirty seconds then five seconds and at that point I don't even wanna play anymore. I do get that they need to make money somehow, but there's no way as users we need to watch something for that long. Another participant said, "I understand profitability, but the amount of ads is often egregious," even with a user bringing up in-app purchases, "there's normally already in-app purchases that would fund said game. They don't need ad sponsorship." Another user discussed that if the game is being advertised as free, then they shouldn't be forced to play other games (ads) or forced to stay and watch other ads without getting anything in return. It would waste time, exactly honing in on the hidden labor and guise of "free" mobile games. 100% of respondents said they have downloaded a free game and deleted it because of the number of ads displayed, which makes them, as players, no longer want to play. I specifically asked whether they had willingly interacted with ads and explained why, with most responses citing in-game

rewards. This is platform exploitation, as David Hesmondhalgh discusses (in relation to music platforms), but it relates to a similar idea within the gaming world. Hesmondhalgh's discussion of streaming platforms helps reveal how free-to-play mobile games participate in the same broader system of platform-based exploitation. In his analysis of music services, Hesmondhalgh explains that platforms rely on "methods used by now-dominant music platforms to convert user activities into data... and how opaque technological systems might be researched" (5). This process mirrors the structure of F2P mobile games: every ad a player is forced to watch, every pause in gameplay, and every in-game action becomes behavioral data that developers track, monetize, and use to refine future advertising. What appears to be casual entertainment is actually a continuous system of surveillance and commodification. Just as music platforms turn listening habits into profitable datasets, F2P games turn player attention into revenue streams. In both cases, users unknowingly perform labor, producing measurable economic value through their time, behavior, and engagement while believing they are simply enjoying "free" content.

The point of conducting this survey was to collect my own research and data from people I interact with, work with, go to school with, etc., to see how they feel about the ads on free mobile games. While I expected these results, it still shows that players are fed up and do not want to keep actively participating in an industry where players and consumers are not respected. These survey results highlight more than just personal frustration; they reveal a deeper tension within the free-to-play ecosystem. When players describe feeling disrespected, overwhelmed, or treated like a "means to an end," they are identifying the exact dynamics that scholars of digital culture critique at a systemic level. The dissatisfaction expressed in my survey is not simply about annoying ads; it reflects a growing awareness that the industry relies on extracting value from players rather than providing genuine enjoyment. This frustration opens the door to

understanding how F2P games participate in a much larger pattern of platform-based exploitation, where users unknowingly produce profit through their time, data, and attention.

Most of the time, the connotation of labor is associated with physical movement, i.e., construction or factory work. Even though labor can mean anything, we tend only to recognize what is visible and physically exhausting. Similar to the idea in Mierle Laderman Ukeles' *Manifesto For Maintenance Art*, she references the unrecognized labor of being a mother, a constant, daily form of care work that is essential yet rarely framed as "real work," even though mothers quite literally keep the world functioning. Much like the hidden labor of mothers, or any labor that isn't tied to physical exertion, gaming is rarely discussed as a site of labor because it exists in a virtual space. But the absence of physical movement does not mean the lack of effort. Watching ads inside free-to-play mobile games is a perfect example. Wasting time in any sense is unproductive, which is precisely what ads do. While one might download a mobile game for distraction, relaxation, or entertainment, a so-called "free" game should not consume so much time because users simply cannot play due to the number of ads running. Forced ad-watching becomes a form of labor because it requires unnecessary attention, waiting, and cognitive effort, all of which generate profit for the company, not the player. It's the same philosophy as any labor that hides itself behind the illusion of choice: players believe they are simply "enduring" ads as part of the game, when in reality they are performing a kind of work. Their time, attention, and data are being extracted and monetized without being acknowledged as labor at all.

Based on the theoretical framework of my argument, the survey results, and research, the general public of players already believes the F2P mobile game market is too oversaturated with games and ads. With the competitive nature of the industry, it is understandable that not every game can rely on in-game purchases for revenue. Understandably, games need to advertise for

monetization. The simple solution is to compensate for the time spent on watching ads. Keep the in-game reward incentives, but also give them to players after every ad watched. In most games, players have to physically click on the “watch an ad for X reward” button, but in this case, mobile games need to just make an automatic shift to rewards after every ad in-game, regardless. Players should still have the option to watch extra ads for rewards if they choose, but, out of respect for players’ time and attention, rewards for ads should be compensated automatically. It’s a win-win scenario. The game makes revenue and collects data, and the player gets “paid” for their time. Their time and labor are recognized. The rewards would not cost the game company anything extra, since they are in-game only.

Free-to-play mobile games turn seemingly casual leisure into a space of hidden labor. The pieces are all there: players are forced to watch advertisements, wait through unavoidable interruptions, and pay attention to in-game prompts that generate data and revenue. Even though these tasks require no physical effort, they demand cognitive attention, patience, and time, resources that are valuable to the gaming companies. By reframing this time and attention as labor, it becomes clear that players are performing unpaid work for the industry’s benefit, often without reward or recognition. Just as Mierle Laderman Ukeles identifies the invisible labor of maintenance work, the repetitive, unacknowledged tasks in F2P games: ad-watching, level-waiting, and data-producing interactions constitute a similar form of labor, hidden under the guise of entertainment. By automatically compensating players for ad-watching with in-game rewards, developers can acknowledge the value of their time and attention while still generating revenue. This adjustment would transform an exploitative practice into a mutually beneficial system: the game collects revenue and data, and players receive tangible recognition for their contributions. Ultimately, free-to-play games can remain “free” in name while respecting

players' labor, making the experience genuinely enjoyable rather than a system of hidden exploitation.

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