Monetizing Your OUYA Game

We have written this document as a guide to help you navigate the thorny landscape of price and business model when publishing your game. Here we offer our recommendations for how to approach these choices on OUYA.

We believe that every developer should have a chance to succeed. We've seen the pitfalls of some, and celebrated the successes of others - and this is some of what we've learned so far.

Remember, the decision on how to monetize is up to you. We're just here to help!

If you have any questions please feel free to contact us:
tadhg@ouya.tv
jared@ouya.tv
alex@ouya.tv

This document is divided into 2 chapters:

1. The Paygate Model

2. The Free-to-Play Model

The Paygate Model

This model is the most common on OUYA both for its ease of use, and clarity to the end user. Since everything on OUYA is free to try, this model entails that the developer include a couple free levels, followed by a paygate, which prompts the user to pay in order to continue their experience. Once the fee is paid, the remainder of the game is unlocked and the player continues gaming without interruption.

In this model, the developer may later include Downloadable Content for additional charges. They may also introduce additional in-game purchases if they mesh with the original experience. See later sections for details.

Free To Try

It is standard policy for OUYA games to provide free game content that players can try before they buy. This free content acts as a developer's first-foot-forward before asking the player to make a purchase, so it is incredibly important.

What developers often try and do is hold as much of a game behind a curtain as possible. Although it sounds counter-intuitive, it's usually better to provide players with a great free experience and then rely on those positive feelings to drive purchases at the paywall.

Another common practice is to offer games completely free. It may also seem counter-intuitive, but this can have an equally negative effect, because players may not engage if they don't believe they will receive any value for their time.

To be successful in OUYA's free to try atmosphere, some developers provide a mode that the player can always play for free. Others place a paygate deep enough into the game that they can rely on players becoming engaged before choosing to pay.

There's no one fixed model here, but as a general guide we suggest that it's better to appear generous rather than selfish.

The most effective paygates woo a player into passing through by simply reminding them of all the things that they have enjoyed up to this point, and showing them a sneak preview of what's to come.

Buy Options

Sometimes it can be alluring to overcomplicate the purchasing process of a game. It can be confusing for users if there are no clear and consistent options marked "Buy", or no easy way for the player to buy the game immediately after loading.

We recommend that you always include clear purchase options within the menu of a paygate game. It can be as simple as including an option in your menu called "Buy" or "Unlock Full Game".

Here are some things to consider to help get players to pass through your paygate:

- Make your free to try element representative of the full gameplay experience.
- Don't build a throwaway demo, make sure players can pick up where they left off when the experience is over.
- Always provide opportunity to purchase the game outside the constraints of the paygate (Main Menu, Pause Menu, Promoted Product, Web.)
- Avoid hiding purchases within sub-menus
- Make your paygate feel natural, rather than punishing or awkward - such as time based gates, or gates before boss fights.
- Never tie paygates to saves.

Price Points

Many developers for OUYA create for the love of gaming. Many others make games to find their way to fame and fortune. One common thing we've found is that the most important thing for ALL developers, is that they want people to try their game. Often they believe the best way to make that happen is to provide the game completely free.

We have noticed this isn't always the case, because of a concept called Relative Value.

Whether you are a commercially-minded developer trying to pay the rent or an artistically minded indie who cares more about having your game played than paid-for, it's always worth determining the right price.

If a player sees a bunch of games priced cheaply, but then sees another which is premium, it might make the expensive game seem like an outlier. On the other hand, it might make it seem a deeper and more rewarding experience.

Another thing to consider is that by pricing a game at an appropriate value, it allows developers to discount their title later, or put it on sale at key times of the year.

We recommend using the following price points for OUYA games, for a variety of reasons:

$14.99:
A game at this price point is usually setting itself out as the best-of-the-best on OUYA, including games such as *Towerfall*. $14.99+ games promise many hours of fun, deeply engaging stories and similar benefits. They are often exclusive, platform-defining games that make the console desirable as much as the game itself.

$9.99:
A $9.99 game is also considered a premium game. Players will expect many hours of absorbing fun, a cohesive theme, and original concepts, or original twists on a classic gameplay mechanics. Many $9.99 games offer multiplayer elements that get folks excited to play in the same room again. A good example is *Amazing Frog*.

$4.99:
A $4.99 game still carries the expectations of being a good game, but players commonly don't expect the game to be all-encompassing. They are well polished when it comes to art, and sound. They can offer 4+ hours of play. A recent example is FOTONICA.

$2.99:
A $2.99 game can be a quick thrill, or a game that the player expects will be fun but not necessarily hold their attention. $2.99 games essentially say to the player that they're going to have a good time but it will likely be short (1-2 hours). They are not necessarily the most polished games when it comes to art, but they are a blast while they last! Few of these games offer multiplayer experiences.

Pay-What-You-Want Price Points

Finally one approach that some developers like to use in their games is that of the flexible price point. In this variant of the paygate model the player is asked how much they would like to pay for the game, and then it's up to the players to decide. This is a model that has been used very successfully by a number of games through such efforts as the Humble Bundle and the like.

We generally advise against using flexible pricing over the long term. Flexible pricing's greatest value is in helping to promote a game, to generate a marketing story around it and show it to be doing some good. However that becomes devalued if the game is permanently priced flexibly.

Downloadable Content

A popular add-on model for monetizing games is to use downloadable content (or "DLC") packs. DLC packs commonly appear after the initial paygate release of a game and offer extra content like more levels, new maps, new character classes and other significant expansions upon an existing game. They can be a great way to re-energize your player base too, showing off new content and getting them excited.

DLC is essentially an extension of the paygate model, and so the thinking behind it is similar. It is typical for DLC packs to cost less than the initial cost of a game (generally 50% less or lower) but games can also offer more than one pack over time.

Here are some general points on DLC:

- There is no requirement from OUYA for DLC to also be free-to-try, so don't build your packs with those in mind.
- If you offer DLC packs, make sure that you have a Store link in the main menu of the game. As with previous notes above, make sure that the buying options are simple to navigate and use.
- Make sure that you update your tile assets, text and the main menu of the game to tell players that there is new DLC available. Don't rely on them only noticing from

an alert or passing message.
- Do not create a new paygate for DLC. Charge for it openly and fairly.
- Do create bundle packs, so that if the player enters the game for the first time and sees that he can buy it or buy DLC, offer an option to buy both at once. Offer a small (10%) discount if they do.
- Always specify what's included in a DLC pack ("10 new levels! 5 new character types! etc")

The Free-to-Play Model

Free-to-play ("F2P") games are among the most popular kinds on mobile and social networks because they permit players to play for long periods of time and turn charging into an optional rather than required activity. Typical free-to-play games sell a mix of premium currency packs for real cash and items, energy and other useful materials in the game. But the player can always play for free. Depending on the game or platform this usually results in a small percentage of players actually paying (5% for example) but those who do sometimes pay disproportionately. It is not uncommon in free-to-play gaming to hear of players who spend more than $100 (in some cases even $1000) per month on a game that they truly love.

The free to play model is less common on OUYA than the paygate model, but OUYA fully supports free-to-play purchases. Players can download and play the game and then purchases items within it, and those purchases are processed through our framework like any other transaction. Constructing a free to play game requires a different approach to a paygate game because you have to create a store, currencies, metrics for measuring player behavior and a game design that supports the game economy.

Whereas a paygate game uses a Buy option in its menu and perhaps some DLC, F2P games have stores built in as a part of the game experience. Therefore you need to think of them somewhat differently from the ground up. Players need close access to stores all the time, for example. At the same time you don't want to end up making a game that is solely about transactions and money, and navigating all the different constraints can be difficult. We hope this section of the guide gives you a good grounding.

General Principles

There are several approaches to creating a free-to-play game, but the most important lesson is to design it from the ground up. Many developers make the mistake of trying to take a classic game and just add free-to-play in the hope that it will work, and it almost never does. There are certain types of game that fit very well with a free-to-play economy, and they tend to have these traits:

1. Lots of scope for player creativity, such as building characters in RPGs, growing farms or building cities.
2. Frequency-oriented game designs. Most free-to-play games are designed to be played in a little-and-often mold.
3. Socially connected. Free-to-play games usually work best when player cooperation or competition becomes an important factor over time.
4. Endless game designs. Free-to-play games usually have no end state, no final boss, and no big finish. They run and run.
5. Large progression curves. Free-to-play games typically use leveling to meter out their gameplay over a very long period of time.

6. Moderate use of chance. Free-to-play games often incorporate a reasonable amount of luck. Item drops and loot, for example, are very common in free-to-play MMOs.
7. Multiple currencies. A typical free-to-play game will incorporate at least two currencies, one "soft" (easily earned in-game and spent a lot as part of gameplay) and one "hard (hard to earn in-game but easily purchased, spent for advantage). Both commonly have very different use cases.
8. Non-Narrative. Free-to-play games usually do not try to tell a big story.

Pay-To-Exploit

It's vital to understand that the role of purchases in a free-to-play game revolves around allowing the player to exploit, but not outright cheat, in the game. Badly constructed free-to-play economies usually devolve into pay-to-win economies, and those prove unpopular with players, especially in the West. What you want to do is create ways for the player to skip over some of the grind of the game, to give them a helping hand, but not make the game boring in the process. This is harder than it sounds.

If you're unsure how to approach this then we recommend that you use a model called "The Free-to-Play Triangle" (first coined by Tadhg, our 2nd party developer relations and free-to-play guy) to help steer you. This model is best described by this graphic:
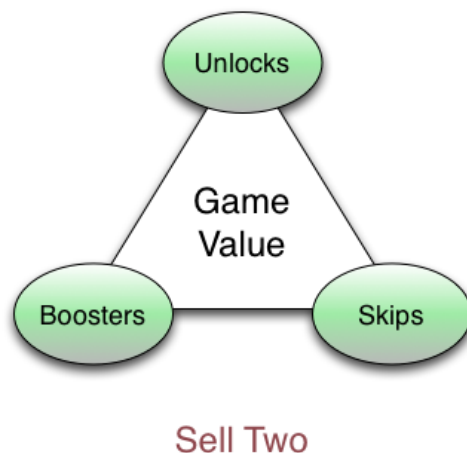
The idea is very simple: To avoid wrecking your game don't try and turn every aspect of it into a transaction. If you do then the overall game quality will be compromised and players will find paths to pay-to-win. That will lead to many unintended consequences.

The triangle breaks free-to-play game economies down into three parts:

Unlocks: Permanent advantages that a player can get, such as higher-level items that are locked behind levels. The player pays to obtain early access. Once paid for the unlocked item remains available to the player for as long as she wants it.

Boosts: Temporary (or consumable) advantages that a player can purchase, such as a potion that she might be able to use to restore health. Boost-centric games often have cheap boosts that cost soft currency and more powerful boosts that cost small amounts of hard currency. Typically the player starts with some hard currency that she spends in the game while playing to boost, and later realizes she needs to buy some more hard currency to continue to do so.

Skips: Skips let the player get past the boring parts or make the game hurry up. You have to be careful with skips. Many social games have historically used energy (you only get to take so many turns and then you have to wait hours for more, or pay) or social obligation (spam all your Facebook friends to get them to join your game, or else pay). These are called "pinch points", but they tend to turn players, particular non-casual gamers such as those who buy OUYAs. Better forms of skip involve experience-point enhancers, instant-build-time purchases and more. Find ways to add value with skips rather than take it away.

Free To Try

It should be clear by now that OUYA does not need to have a specific free-to-try rule for free-to-play games because it's already inherent to their design. All free-to-play games let players play for as long as they like, therefore they are free-to-try. We advise not violating the spirit of that by locking off a lot of game content behind pay gates. There is always a temptation for game makers to try and make their economics complex and subtle, to serve different types of customer or find new ways to obtain whale revenue. The vast majority of time these turn out to be a bad idea.

Currencies

The best means of monetizing a free-to-play game involve selling packs of hard currency. According to most research the best way to do this is to create 5-8 packs of the currency and sell them with volume discounts. You want to ensure that you have a cheap pack ($1.99) and also an expensive pack ($99.99) and then a range in between, but not too many options.

Here's an example list:

PACKAGE	PRICE	Gold/Dollar (approx.)
10 Gold	$1.99	0.20c
45 Gold	$7.99	0.19c
85 Gold	$14.99	0.18c
175 Gold	$29.99	0.17c
310 Gold	$49.99	0.16c
665 Gold	$99.99	0.15c

Avoid the temptation of over-complicating this by adding more choices, bundles or lots of special offers. Oft times free-to-play games get lost in being too sophisticated with their economics, trying to sell bundles of multiple currencies, special super-premium items for cash and so on. The result is usually messy and difficult for new players to understand, and impossible for a small development studio to administer.

Avoid selling hard currency in multiples of thousands. Large sale volumes (1000 gold for $1.99) seem less valuable whereas buying 10 of something makes it feel like every one is a valuable object. Your soft currency might run into high values in this way but your hard currency should be treasured.

When players come to buying their boosts, unlocks and skips they then do so in the game using hard currency. We recommend that as a principle of good practice that you always make sure that hard currency transactions are visible, that players can see exactly what they are getting, and that they ask players to confirm the spend. Remember that while it's easy for players to earn and spend soft currency every day, hard currency represents their own time and money in the game. Always avoid making the player feel cheated, even if accidentally.

Sales

Use sale offers to drive purchases. Not only do they work in the moment, they often result in "afterglow" effects (where purchases continue at an elevated rate even when the sale is over). Happy hour sales, weekend sales, limited-time sales and limited-unit sales are all popular ways to create this effect. Some games even use limited edition sales, where a particular item is only available to launch customers, for example.

Buying Options

Whereas paygate games support purchase from several different locations (in the game's page, menu and the gate itself), free-to-play stores tend to need to be accessible throughout gameplay. Visibility is very important, as is accessibility to the store. So consider including a visible store link in your user interface at all times, and likewise consider binding a joypad button (we recommend the OUYA button in the center of the pad) to the store.

Hard Currency Awards

Don't make the mistake of only allowing hard currency to be increased through purchase. While difficult to earn, players should still be able to earn some of the hard currency over the course of play. Free-to-play games typically award hard currency under circumstances such as:

1. When the player first starts the game, typically they get an amount of hard currency (10 Gold) with which to begin. Often a game will then show them how to spend Gold as a part of its tutorial, but still leave them with enough that they can get used to using it.
2. When the player gains a level, typically it comes with some hard currency

attached.
3. When the player completes a significant quest in a game, sometimes they receive hard currency awards.
4. Lucky loot or other similar drops might sometimes result in hard currency.

Be sparing with these awards, but ensure that they exist in the game.

Exchanges and Trading

Providing direct hard-for-soft currency exchanges is usually a bad idea because of the unintended effects that then result in the soft currency economy. The key to thinking about this well is to realize that your game is actually a set of interlocking economies rather than one whole piece, and so ensuring that the bridges between them don't lead to unintended chaos are important. Otherwise the result is often pay-to-win by accident.

It is also important to ensure that while hard currency may be spent in a game that players cannot earn it back. Suppose, for example, your game sells a super-powerful weapon for hard currency, but then later the player wants to trade that back in. Trade-ins should always result in soft currency. This does constitute a form of exchange (see above) but it will be less commonly used than straight trades, and therefore less likely to mess with other economies (unless you get the prices wrong of course).

Finally if your game allows player trading or gifting, be careful of basing that activity on hard currency trades between players. It can work in certain circumstances but it can equally wreak havoc. Make sure that you are using rakes or other forms of currency sink to ensure that inflation does not spiral out of control in the game. As with real world economics, too much and too little inflation both have very negative consequences on a free-to-play game. You'll need to closely monitor inflation through your metrics and adjust the game accordingly.

Server-Side Economics

The price table above is merely an ideal example, but every game is different in reality and you'll need to be able to quickly react to the demands of your player population. With free-to-play games the game is also a community, and so the biggest risk to your game is if the community finds some aspect of the game to be a turn-off.

So if you are going to create a free-to-play game then it's crucial that you invest some time in making sure that your hard and soft economies can be tuned server-side. Waiting to patch the game and send a monthly update (as though it were an app) will be too long. Make sure that you have the metrics to monitor what's going on in the game and you can then change the economy every day if necessary.

Furthermore make sure that you have support for multiple real-world currencies. If a British player is playing, for example, make sure that he sees prices in pounds, not dollars. People from different countries will play your game and studies show that when they see prices charged in their local currency they are more likely to transact. Don't

assume that every player around the world is comfortable with US dollars.

It is also very important that your game has backups and the ability to restore players' games. It's bad when a player loses a save game on any system, but it's worse when they lose, say, a character on which they have spent over $100 of real-world money. Regardless of what end user license agreements might say, players usually feel a strong sense of ownership when it comes to games in which they have monetized. You need to look after them.

Decorative Items

Outside of the boost/unlock/skip triangle, the other kind of item that you can usually sell in a free-to-play game is decorative. Hats, for example, or character skins are pretty common. City-sim style games they often sell Christmas trees. These kinds of item typically have no gameplay value but players find them delightful on their own merits.

Games commonly do not thrive on selling decorative items alone. It varies from game to game, but you can commonly expect the balance between the sale of functional versus decorative items to be 10-20%. Christmas trees alone probably won't make you rich. However they can be a nice, and inexpensive to you, value addition.

F2P Is Not DLC

Finally, don't make the mistake of confusing free-to-play economics with downloadable content sales. Retail games commonly sell packs of DLC in order to prolong their profitability, for cash, but free-to-play games typically avoid doing that. The free-to-play game is a service, and so players expect content in the game to update on a regular and evolving basis.

If you get into the realm of trying to sell DLC as well then you will likely start to see players shard across multiple versions of the game (those who have the base game, those who have the base game plus the first DLC, those with the base game plus the second DLC, those with all three, and so on). That will make support and balancing a complete nightmare. Just focus on trying to deliver one kind of game in a way that your community of players will love.