



Indie XP: Setting your mobile game up for success

How to build your mobile game into a sustainable business early in the development process.

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Introduction

Game development is challenging. You need to come up with a great idea, plan the production, and then dedicate time to development. Launching a game used to be the end of the journey and, if players liked it, a significant measure of success.

Now, creating an amazing game is often not enough. Things are more competitive than ever before, and it can be tough to face off against larger studios with more resources. Topics like user acquisition, monetization, and player engagement are now vital for your game's success.

We're here to give you the skills you need to stay competitive - without breaking the bank or compromising on player experience. In this ebook we explore topics throughout the game development lifecycle including game design, monetization, creative marketing, and more, that you can learn to give your mobile game an edge.



Setting your game up for success

Your game is art, but it also needs to be successful enough to keep the lights on. There are two fundamental things you need to focus on to ensure your game's success: Player engagement and revenue.

In other words:

1. Are players coming back to your game after their initial session?
2. Will players support your studio through in-app purchases (IAP) or viewing advertisements?

Contrary to popular belief, preparing for both of these questions starts early in the development process while you're working on your core game loop. Engagement strategies built in reactively after launch are never going to be as effective, and monetization added afterwards can lead to a worse experience for players.

Simply put, make your game engaging and profitable, and do it in a way that always delivers an awesome experience for your players.



Setting your game up for success —

The importance of retention and player engagement

"Great titles are released each year and acquisition costs are increasing with more competition. You need to get the most value from each user playing your game by trying to increase retention and engagement."

— Erkey Uzun, Co-founder,
Unico Studios

Player retention and engagement are key to a game's long-term success. Mobile games that focus on long-term engagement are seeing over 80% of their revenue coming from players who have been with the game for more than a month.¹ In fact, for the majority of these games, over 56% of daily active users (DAU) have been playing for more than a month. This means it's critical to keep players engaged for well outside of the launch window.

We've seen a few interesting trends in the last year*:

- Better games are being released that focus heavily on player experience. There is more widespread use of best practices and Unity has seen a pattern of continuous improvement with gaming KPIs. Comparing first-year metrics for games launched in 2016 versus 2020, we have seen 75th percentile retention at day 30 grow by 7.1%, while in-app purchase conversion rates rose by 7.7%.²
- Lifetime value (LTV) is much more predictable and user acquisition (UA) spend is better controlled.
- Players are (generally) sticking around in games longer.
- Looking at the longer day 7 and day 30 retention numbers, we can see that games with ads have higher long term retention metrics. Intelligent and thoughtful ad implementation is just as important this year as it was last.

* Based on Gaming in 2020 & 2021: Unity insights.



Unity insights

Players are spending more money in mobile games, more frequently and in larger amounts. Mobile ad revenues are up more than 8% compared to 2020 - on top of already strong baseline growth rates for both In-App Purchases (IAP) and Ad Revenue.

¹ 11 Effective Engagement Strategies, Unity, 2020

² Analysis of deltaDNA data for Tier 1 countries on Android

Game mechanics to keep your players engaged

These are some straightforward and effective mechanics you can build in early to boost engagement. While it's possible to build these in later, it's proven that engagement tactics are more effective when integrated early into the core game loop.

First-time user experience (FTUE):

Unless your game is very casual with fewer mechanics, a strong FTUE is required to onboard new players.



Unity insights

Players will quickly leave your game if they don't understand how to play, making this vital for engagement and retention.



Make things easy

A great way to ensure players stick around is to make the first gameplay experience fun and easy. This lets players learn the new mechanics without getting frustrated.



Show off the good stuff

You only have a short window to make a great impression, so make sure you're showing off all the best features and gameplay to hook players in.



Exploration vs. guided

This depends on the type of game, but typically with more casual games it's fine to let players explore and jump right into gameplay. With more complex games it's important to have a guided tutorial to explain the mechanics.



Positive reinforcement

One great way to get players to stick around is by rewarding them early on. Make the early accomplishments in your game matter by giving away some premium currency, items, or rewards.



Prototype early, and often

It's vital to take a user-centric approach to development and review new versions of features and gameplay mechanics on a regular basis. This flexibility makes it easier to fix problems and optimize gameplay elements quickly.



Know what to track

This pretty much applies to every part of your game, but understanding the early user experience metrics is one of the most important things for your game. [This blog](#) is a great resource to get started.

Daily rewards

The concept is simple - a repeatable log-in bonus that rewards players for coming back to your game. With even simple implementations of this mechanic you can see upwards of 5-10% increases in engagement. Daily rewards are now standard across many modern mobile games, with players expecting to be rewarded for consecutive play sessions.

Daily tasks

Each day there is a set amount of tasks that players can complete for rewards. This provides a great way to encourage players to play (and stop playing) your game for specific periods of time - increasing overall engagement. Daily tasks can be tuned to onboard your players, introduce new game mechanics, or funnel players into specific parts of your game with targeted tasks. Completing tasks creates a natural breakpoint for players, letting them take a break from your game to avoid burn-out.



FRAG Pro Shooter by Oh BiBi

Difficulty balancing

While not a specific mechanic, difficulty balancing is an important tool for managing retention and engagement. Using tools like funnels in Unity Analytics, you can see where players are dropping off and dig into the reasons why. If there's a specific level/area players are struggling with, you can address this by tweaking difficulty, or providing a key item to help out. Likewise, players dropping off at a specific point can also indicate a technical issue that needs to be addressed.

Identify dropoff points

These are areas in your game where players, new or experienced, are leaving your game. This can indicate that there isn't enough content to keep players engaged, or a specific game mechanic is needed. Using analytics tools, you can identify where these points are and start creating additional content such as levels/items to keep players engaged. Outside of creating additional content, there may be cases where something needs to be removed or tweaked such as an annoying mechanic, level, or other blocker.

Long-term engagement is more important than short term revenue.

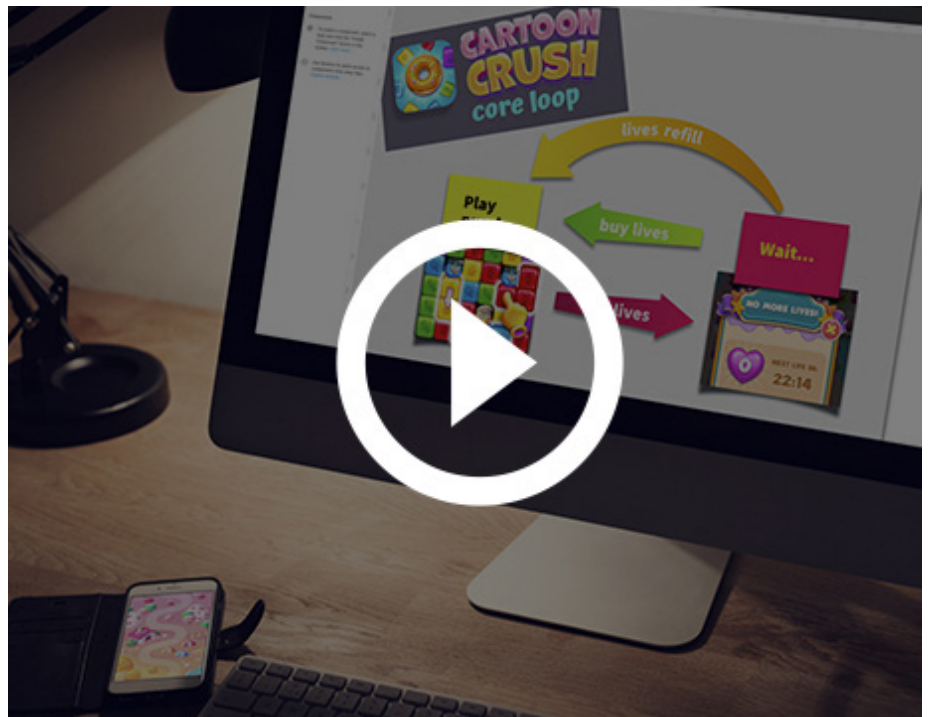
If you have solid retention and engagement metrics, monetization will come naturally. However, if you push monetization too aggressively, this could negatively impact engagement and retention. Like we mentioned at the beginning of this section, the vast majority of revenue comes from long-term players who are having fun.

That being said, thinking about revenue early in the development process is always a good idea. Building monetization mechanics into your game during the main design phase is a great way to ensure your ads and IAP feel natural as parts of the game - not simply tacked on after launch.

* Based on the [deltaDNA mobile games index](#), 2016-2019.

WATCH

Unite Now 2020:
Improving your core game loop to
drive retention



Setting your game up for
success —

Monetization and game design

Making money as an indie developer is vital - it enables you to keep making great games for your players. We all know the examples of monetization gone wrong, so how do you build in revenue drivers that don't compromise on player experience? You need to start looking at monetization as a key part of your game design - not something that's added in later on.

When ads are built into your game with the same consideration as a core feature, they are more effective and you avoid situations where your monetization efforts feel “outside” of your core game.



Unity insights

Mobile gaming saw a strong positive impact in 2020. When compared to 2019, first day microtransaction purchases were up over 50% year-over-year.



How do I get started?

One of the biggest challenges for indies is knowing where to start with monetization. There are multiple tools, resources, guides, and more - but what's the first step? Beyond implementation, there are many factors that affect how you monetize your game. Here are some methods we recommend to get started.

Game Design

Monetization needs to start at the same time as designing your core gameplay loop. When you're looking at how players will move through your game from a design perspective, you need to consider how users will interact with ads.

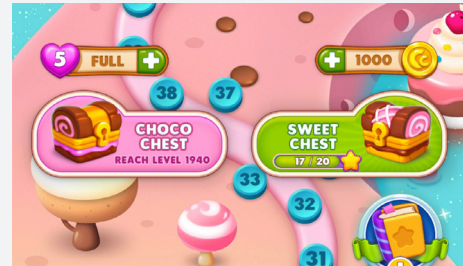


Cartoon Crush by Zenith Games

Are there specific times in your game when users are expecting a reward? Rewarded ads offer a great way to deliver rewards as part of the natural game progression. It's important to identify what reward is most valuable to players to make these the most effective.

EXAMPLE:

Throughout game sessions, players can earn stars when completing a level. These let you unlock a chest that contains boosters, items, and in-game currency. Once the chest is open, players can collect the original items or double the reward if they watch a short ad. This is a positive experience for the player since they can gain even more rewards than usual.



Cartoon Crush by Zenith Games

In mobile games, an interstitial ad is a moment where players can pause and recharge before moving back into gameplay. The transition between a level ending, an interstitial ad, and heading back to a menu feels natural. It doesn't break the flow of the game, making it less intrusive for players.

EXAMPLE:

You have a puzzle game that requires concentration and skill during each level. After a level is complete, you decide to offer breaks to players before they can move on. Using an interstitial ad as the transition between the end of a level and the main menu feels natural and doesn't break the flow.



Optimizing for your genre and game economy

Your game genre has significant impact on the type of monetization that will work best for your players. If you're designing a hypercasual game with short sessions and little to no game economy, something like a banner ad can be ideal (as long as it doesn't interfere with your UI or disrupt gameplay!).

Hypercasual

These tend to be simple games with little, or very simple, game economies. Play sessions are shorter and players don't usually stick around as long as they would in most games. Banner ads offer a great way to monetize a hypercasual game, generating value from users enjoying shorter play sessions.

Casual

These make up the majority of mobile games in the market and contain a mix of features and revenue drivers. Typically IAPs and game economy mechanics are still on the lighter side, making them a great fit for interstitial ads. These ads provide a nice break in between gameplay sessions.

MidCore

These types of games usually contain more complex mechanics and gameplay loops. Economies can be more complex, featuring a mix of currencies, collectables, and items for players. Rewarded ads offer a great way to encourage players to monetize with additional valuable items from the in-game economy.

Likewise, a more complex game with a built-in economy would be a good fit for a rewarded ad, giving players a natural break between sessions.

The economic models for particular genres of games are fairly uniform. Some common examples are:

- Builder/Battler
- Match-3/Puzzle
- Character Collection Game Simulation
- Card Collection Games

Each of these have different economic models that can be "borrowed" for a new game in that genre.

Types of ads to consider

When thinking about what will work best for your game, there are a few standard ad formats to consider. It all starts by looking at things from a design perspective - what will fit best into your game?

Interstitial ads

These are ads that typically cover the entire screen. Interstitial ads are best shown to players between content at natural break points in the game. Similar to a commercial break in television, these ads work well in between levels or game activities, giving players a moment to rest.



Interstitial ad in *Cartoon Crush* by Zenith Games



Unity insights

Looking at the longer day 7 and day 30 retention numbers, games with ads have higher long-term retention metrics. Overall, games with ads had stronger retention across all categories besides role-playing games and simulation.



Rewarded ad in *Cartoon Crush* by Zenith Games

Rewarded ads

Rewarded ads will grant players an in-game currency, item, or similar reward for viewing the ad. Worked into the game the right way, these can be a powerful tool to drive ad revenue, player engagement, and even boost retention. Typically, these work best during moments where players are naturally expecting a reward - a valuable item or in-game currency. Players agree to watch a short ad in return for something valuable to them, it's your job to make the value piece fit.

Example of a banner ad in *CastleFusion* by Shark Jump

Banner ads

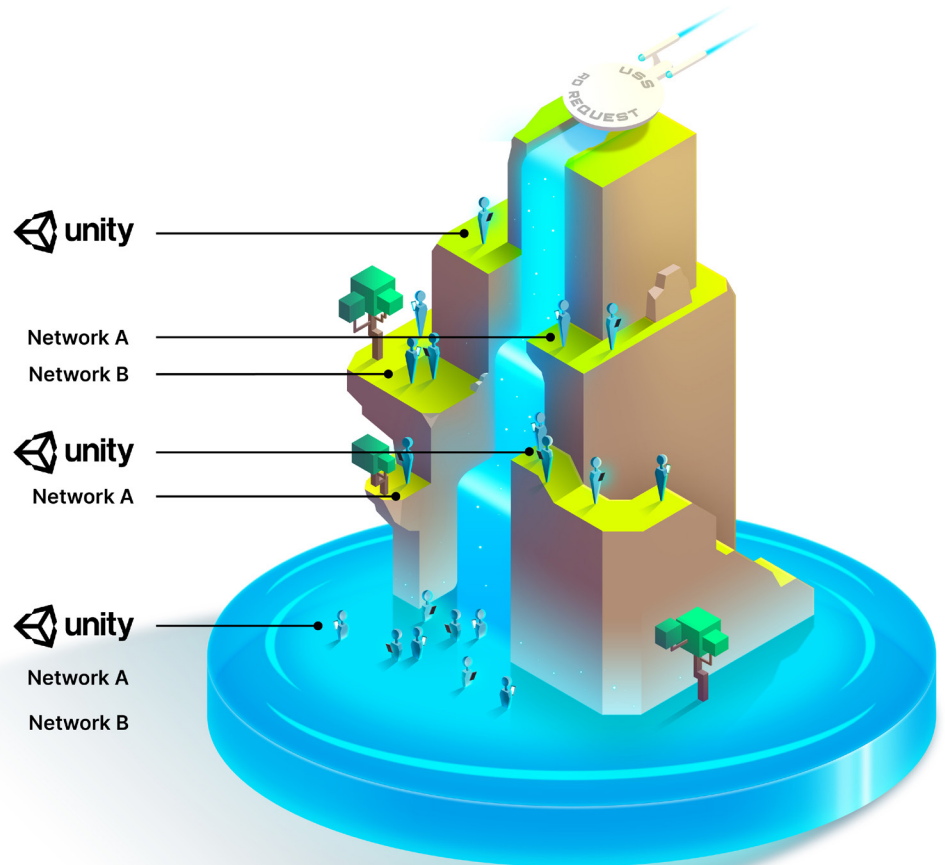
Like the name implies, these are ads placed on the top or bottom of the phone screen. Banner ads can be great for more casual games with shorter play sessions, as those games typically don't have a game economy or in-app purchases. Since these are on-screen within the game, it's essential to make sure the ad does not detract from important information or interfere with the UI.



Choosing ad partners

Just as important as choosing the ad itself, the ad partners you use will be a huge factor for your game.

1. If you're a smaller/solo indie developer, your best bet may be to research and pick one ad network. This will mean easier integration, and only one SDK to manage on the tech side with less maintenance. However, you must ensure that the single ad partner can fill the impressions you need for your game.
2. If you have a larger team, it might still be best to start with one ad network and test extensively before integrating more complex solutions. Multiple ad networks with an ad mediator can be ideal for larger indie studios, but there can be a tradeoff with technical complexity and maintenance. With mediation, ad networks are called in a 'waterfall' style, meaning there's more opportunities to fill an ad placement at different eCPM values. For instance, mediation can call Ad Network 1 for an ad at \$5 eCPM, and if that network can't fill (either because of price or other reasons), Ad Network 2 will be called, and so on. When managed strategically, mediation can result in higher revenue for your game.

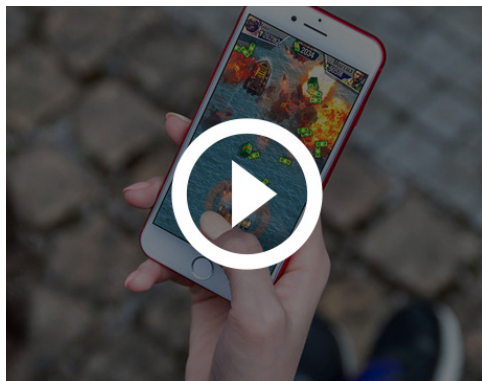


How to measure success

Setting up the right ads is the first step, but how do you know if they are effective? Analytics are something you can go impossibly deep on, but there are a few key metrics that are at the core of measuring the effectiveness of monetization in your game.

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Unite Now 2020:
Monetization and game design



When thinking about your growing game size and health, you should look at daily active users (DAU) and consider if your players are engaging with ads, and seeing the right ad content. Once you begin to understand which types of ads are performing in your game, you can look at optimizing to improve your engagement rates. This can be anything from changing the rewards for a Rewarded Video, or testing different locations for interstitial ads.



Revenue

This is the obvious one - how much money are you making? Specifically, you need to measure your return on investment or “ROI” as it relates to the costs of running your game. There are specific ways to measure this (outlined below), but this will be one of the biggest benchmarks for your game



Average revenue per user (ARPU)

This is a great gauge of how effective your game is from a revenue perspective. ARPU is essentially the average amount of revenue you make from each user in your game. This can change from channel to channel.



Retention

You want to make sure players are staying in your game and that your monetization feels like a natural part of the game - not something “outside” of the core game loop. Once you begin collecting data, you need to look at where users are churning (leaving) your game and where there are pain points.



Effective cost per thousand impressions (eCPM)

This metric determines the amount of money you can expect to make per thousand impressions on an ad shown in your game. Having a better eCPM indicates that your ads are integrated the right way, and your players are responding well to the type of ads displayed. This also indicates how good your ad partners are at filling your ads and giving you the highest return. Improving this number should be one of your primary goals when it comes to revenue.



Analyzing ad funnels

Taking a look at some of the funnels in your game is an excellent way to begin optimizing for revenue. When looking at your demand funnel, it's important to think about how many potential advertisers can fill the space of your ad placements. Specifically, how many requests (of available ad placements) you can send to the ad network, and how many of those requests are filled (with an advertisement) by the ad network.

Summary

Our goal is to equip you with the right tools to take your creative vision to the next level. In this ebook we've explored the key business features throughout development that work to make your indie mobile game a success.

Building your mobile game into a successful business is challenging, and the right tools, services, and strategic approach makes all the difference. We hope this ebook served as a solid initial guide into your journey as a successful indie developer and we encourage you to share your feedback with us.

In our next Indie XP ebook we'll explore how to make the most of the launch window - from soft launch to worldwide launch and beyond.

Unity Team

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