LESSON PLAN

Pay For Play

This lesson is part of *USE, UNDERSTAND & ENGAGE: A Digital Media Literacy Framework for Canadian Schools*: http://mediasmarts.ca/teacher-resources/digital-literacy-framework.

LEVEL: Grades 4 to 6

DURATION: 1 ½ hours

ABOUT THE AUTHOR: Matthew Johnson, Director of Education, MediaSmarts

Overview

In this lesson, students discuss their experiences playing free online games and then learn the costs of these "free" games in the form of paying with money, sharing personal information or providing attention to advertising or branded content. Students then learn a variety of techniques for mitigating the risks and drawbacks of online games and communicate their learning by describing one of these techniques in video-game terms.

Learning Objectives

Key concepts/big ideas: Students will understand...

- Media are constructions: Students come to see that "hype" and product placements are constructed marketing strategies designed to make them "brand ambassadors" and connect good feelings about a game with a specific product.
- Media have commercial implications: Students understand that every top-popular game site is a commercial venture where they "pay" with their attention or data even if they don't spend cash.
- Digital media experiences are shaped by the tools we use: Students understand that game architecture (the choice architecture) is intentionally designed to steer their behavior toward spending, such as by making characters look plain unless a player pays for personalization.

Essential knowledge: Students will learn...

- Consumer Awareness: Students learn that "free" games are often "free-to-play" or "freemium," meaning they are commercial products designed to make money through advertising, upselling premium content, or encouraging players to pay for power-ups and "skip-aheads".

©MEDIASMARTS 2026

- Privacy and Security: Students learn about the privacy risks involved in game registration, such as sites collecting personal information to sell to advertisers or using "cookies" and trackers to monitor user behavior.
- Reading Media: Students learn to identify embedded advertising techniques, including "advergames" where the entire game is a brand promotion, and the use of branded mascots or characters to build "hype".
- Media Health: Students learn to recognize how game designs—such as "the grind" (boring repetitive tasks) or "near-miss" animations in loot boxes—are used to trigger frustration or the desire to spend money.

Performance tasks: Students will be able to...

- Use: Implement technical tools such as ad-blockers and privacy plug-ins to mitigate tracking and advertising; Practice safe habits, such as limiting the information shared in optional survey fields and avoiding connecting games to social media accounts.
- Understand: Analyze and evaluate their favorite game sites to identify at least four specific monetization techniques, such as loot boxes, branded content, or in-game currency; Interpret privacy policies (with adult help) to understand what happens to their personal data.
- Engage: Design and communicate a strategy for managing gaming risks by describing it in video-game terms (e.g., as a "power-up" or "tool"); Create original media by transforming commercial game concepts into their own physical board games, card games, or non-commercial video games using kid-friendly programming tools.

Preparation and Material

- Photocopy the handouts *Pay for Play* and *Penny Wise*
- Arrange either for Internet access for all students or for Internet access with a data projector or digital whiteboard

Procedure

FREE GAMES

Start by asking students:

- Who likes free online games?

- Which are your favourites?
- Where do you go to play them? (App stores, game sites, etc.)

Make a list of the games students named above and the online places (websites or app stores) they go to play them. You can supplement this list with these selections from MediaSmarts' *Young Canadians in a Wireless World* list of top sites among Canadian students in grades 4-6:

- YouTube
- Roblox
- ABCYa!
- Coolmathgames
- NBA.com

WHAT'S FREE?

Ask students what the word "commercial" means. (They will likely describe it in terms of TV commercials.) Explain that when we use the word as an adjective, it means something that's done for the purpose of making money. Ask students how many of the places they play games are *commercial* in that sense, and tell students that of the top fifty most popular among Canadian students, every single one was a commercial site.

Now ask: If the games are free, how do they and the places that host them make money? (Students will probably not have many suggestions on this question, though some might name advertising and others might name paying for premium content.)

Discuss with students the meaning of the word "free." Point out that while some of the things we enjoy (sunlight, fresh air, etc.) are genuinely free, a lot have hidden costs. Some are paid for by taxes (like parks); some we pay for with our attention (like TV shows on commercial channels) and some we need to buy or rent things to be able to do (like needing a soccer ball to play soccer).

Now ask:

- What do you like about free games?
- What don't you like about them?

PAY FOR PLAY

In the discussion arising from the last point, point out that most "free" online games are more accurately called *free-to-play*: it may be free to start playing, but you pay either with your attention, your personal information, or else you have to pay to access the best content (what are called "freemium" games, because they start out free but you pay to get at "premium" content.) Some games also let you play them for free but try to get you to spend money to get an advantage over other players or to skip boring parts.

Distribute the handout *Pay For Play* and go through it with the class. Ask students how these elements of games can make them less fun and can lead you to spend money or give out personal information when you normally wouldn't. Ask students to name examples from games they play.

ASSESSMENT/EVALUATION: PENNY WISE

Now distribute the handout *Penny Wise* and go through it with the class. Then have them visit their favourite free game sites and apps (this can be done in the classroom, in a computer lab or as homework). Have them find games that use at least **four** of the techniques identified in the *Pay For Play* handout and suggest **one** of the tools and habits identified in the *Penny Wise* handout to match each of those techniques.

CONSOLIDATION

One day after delivering the lesson, have students write a few sentences in the voice of "Penny" from the handouts. Tell them to write what Penny would say to a friend who is frustrated by the "boring" part of a game.

EXTENSION ACTIVITY

If you are delivering this lesson for younger students, you may consider supplementing this lesson with the TVOntario Original Series *Wacky Media Songs*. These short videos explore a variety of digital media literacy topics, including advertising and marketing. Here are a few suggested videos and discussion topics:

Create the Hype! There's a whole marketing machine behind movies and they start to create the hype way before the movie even opens by selling us hoodies, toys, t-shirts and more! Guess what? We help create that hype when we wear or use their merchandise!

Before the video, ask: Do you have any clothes or toys that were made to promote a movie, a TV show or a video game? Have you first ever heard about a game, movie or show that way?

After the video, ask: Why do you think marketers use things like toys and clothes to build hype for games, movies or TV shows? How do you feel about giving them free advertising by wearing those clothes? (It's okay if they do! Kids love media and sometimes like being "brand ambassadors." But they should understand that's what they're doing.)

Hiding in Plain Sight! Have you ever watched movies or TV shows and seen brand-name products in them? That's product placement - a sneaky way advertisers promote their products by showing them to us in the media we watch!

Before the video, ask: Have you ever noticed a product you recognized, like a cereal or a kind of chips, in a movie or TV show? Why do you think they were included?

After the video, ask: Why do you think advertisers pay to put their products in TV shows, games and movies? (They make us recognize and remember the products, and because we don't know they're ads we connect the good feeling of enjoying what we're watching with the product.)

They Really Like Us! Marketers like kids because we spend lots of money buying their stuff. Ava sings about some of the tricks marketers use to target kids.

Before the video, ask: Why do you think marketers aim their ads at kids? What makes kids such a valuable audience?

After the video, ask: What are some of the ways that marketers target kids? (Cute characters, video games that feature their brand, putting products at kids' eye-level.) Why do they sometimes show you ads for things you won't be ready to buy for a long time, like cars? (So that you'll have good feelings about the brand by the time you're old enough to buy it.)

ART CREDITS

Shield, chest, potion, armour CC 2D-Retroperspectives http://opengameart.org/users/2d-retroperspectives

Chain CC Gwes http://opengameart.org/users/gwes

Coin, envelope, heart, map, book CC Ravenmore http://opengameart.org/users/Ravenmore

Avatar with glasses CC Noble Master Games http://www.noblemaster.com and Mei-Li Nieuland http://liea.deviantart.com

Clock CC Ravindra Kalkani

STUDENT HANDOUT

PAY FOR PLAY

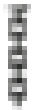
PAY FOR PLAY

Most free games **aren't** really free: you pay for some with your attention, by looking at ads or branded characters while you play, or with your personal information by filling out quizzes or surveys. Other games start out free, but you have to pay to get at the best content. Watch out for these dangers in "free" games!

Ads: Some ads appear on the screen and stay there, usually at the top or side of the screen. You'll be looking at them the whole time you play the game! Video ads are like TV commercials that play before you get to play your game, and even sometimes when you close the game.

Loot boxes and lotteries: You pay for these before you know what's in them. Sometimes they show something like a spinning wheel that ends with a near-miss to show you almost won the best prize.

Branded content: Some games are actually big ads themselves. Your character may be a mascot for a brand of snack or cereal, or a toy, or a character from a cartoon or movie, or you may be **interacting** with the brand by doing something like making a virtual fast-food burger. You might even get a "skin" of a branded character for your avatar to wear!



Links to commercial sites: Some game sites make their money by selling **links** to commercial sites. When you click on something on these sites, you may not know if you're going to play a game or wind up on an ad site.

Registration and profiles: A lot of sites ask you to register or create a profile before you can play. They want to know all about you so they can sell that information to advertisers.

Social network connection: If you're on a social network, lots of game sites want you to register using that account so they can get at all the personal information you have there.

Trackers: Some sites use special files called "cookies" that track what you do and where you go while you're there. Some can even keep tracking you after you leave the site!

Premium content: A lot of the time, what you get for free is just the first level, or the "basic" version. You have to pay to get at the rest. Sometimes you have to pay to be able to talk to other players!

Personalization: Another thing "free" games will get you to pay for is making your character, or the place you live, different from everyone else's. If you want to look different, you'll have to pay for it!

Power-ups: In games where you're playing against other people, the game may be free but you can pay to get powers or weapons other people don't have. That makes it hard to compete if you don't pay to keep up.

Skip-aheads: Other games make you do boring things a lot of times to get ahead, like planting crops or mining for gold. If they do, they'll usually let you pay real money to skip it.

In-game money: In some games you can't buy things with real money, but have to buy game money like Robux instead. You always wind up with some left over after buying things, to make you buy more.

©MEDIASMARTS 2026

STUDENT HANDOUT

PAY FOR PLAY

Penny Wise

TOOLS

Get your mom or dad to install these on your phone or browser to block ads and trackers.

AdBlock Plus: Ad blockers are programs that you plug into Web browsers like Firefox or Chrome. When they're running they keep you from seeing most kinds of ads. But they can't help if the ad is a part of the game or video you want.

Privacy Badger: Privacy Badger is another browser plug-in. It blocks ads and also stops websites from tracking you.

DuckDuckGo: An app for Android devices that stops apps and websites from blocking you.

HABITS

*These are things **you** can do to make playing games online more fun.*

Always ask: Is this an ad? What is it selling? Sometimes ads aren't obvious. If there's something in the game that you can buy, or that *stands for* something you can buy (like a cereal mascot), it's an ad. That may not be a problem — so long as you *know* you're being advertised to.

Don't click: Even if the game you're playing isn't an ad, a lot of times ads or links will take you to advertising sites. Don't click on anything that isn't a part of your game.

Wait for the X: Don't tap on pop-ups right away. Wait until the X button appears, then tap or click it to close the ad.

Do the math: In-game money makes it hard for you to keep track of what you're spending. Remember to check how much real money something costs before you buy anything.

Watch your feelings: Characters in games or apps sometimes try to make you feel bad for not buying something.

Don't say anything you don't have to: When sites ask you to fill out a form or survey, they'll mark the questions you *have* to answer (usually with something like a star or red lettering) and hope that you answer the others. Just fill in the spaces you absolutely have to.

Don't connect through your other accounts: Signing in to a game through Google or another social network may be faster than setting up a new account, but when you do, you give up *a lot* of personal information. At least when you sign up for the game, you get to decide what to share!

Walk away: If you're feeling frustrated with how quickly things are going in a game, you may be tempted to buy a power-up or skip-ahead. But remember, those cost real money! Take a break and do something else for awhile.

Give up the grind: If you feel like you're spending all of your time doing boring things in a game just to get to the good stuff, take a step back. Are you really having fun?

Play with a friend: It's no fun being the only one with the default character! That's how games get you to pay to personalize them. Instead, get a friend to play the free version with you, so you won't be the only one.

Ask for a gift card: If you absolutely have to spend your money on something in a game, or subscribe to a premium service, ask your parents to buy you a gift card instead of buying it for you with a credit card. That way you can't spend more than you mean to — and you'll learn something about managing your money.

Make your own art: It's fun to decorate your avatars, pets, houses and other things in virtual worlds. But you can do all of those things with free art apps and programs, too.

Make your own game: If you love games, why not make your own? You can turn your favourite video game into a card game, a board game, or a playground game. You can even make your own video games: there are lots of free game-making apps and programs and even programming languages that were created for kids to make their own games with.