

USA TODAY

Free games draw 'em in, then offer pay upgrades

By Mike Snider and Brett Molina, USA TODAY
July 15, 2009

There's free, and then there's "freemium."

Free online game destinations such as Disney's Club Penguin and RuneScape have drawn millions of younger players with no-cost, often ad-supported offerings, then made money by encouraging folks to chip in for additional access and features.

This "velvet rope or VIP club model" of subscriptions or tiny transactions gives players "a better experience," says Michael Cai of market research firm Interpret.

Freemium games can be lucrative. More than 1 million of fantasy *RuneScape's* 4.5 million players pay about \$5 a month for premium content and quests, says Nicholas Lovell of U.K. consulting firm Gamesbrief. "If it is a good game, it can be monetized and the developer sees much more of the money. But it's not easy."

Still, developers are looking to draw newcomers. Id Software launched ad-supported *Quake Live* (quakelive.com) earlier this year. Turbine is preparing to offer free access to *Dungeons & Dragons Online* (register at ddo.com). And this week, the all-ages subscription game *Freaky Creatures* (freakycreatures.com) begins offering a free subscription level.

"One of the biggest impacts free-to-play games have had is their ability to draw new consumers into gaming," says analyst Wanda Meloni of M2 Research. "Because they provide a 'zero investment risk,' it lowers the barrier for consumers."

U.S. players will spend more than \$200 million on Web-based games this year, Cai says. "They are growing fast. And if you look at who recently launched, you are starting to see more of the established publishers in the USA."

Among new offerings:

- **Free Realms** (freerealms.com; ages 10-up). Sony Online Entertainment's family-friendly, role-playing virtual world, which launched in April, will reach 5 million registered players by month's end. Explore a vast 3-D map of villages, snow-capped mountains, forests and a mysterious netherworld. Accept quests from characters, take on fun jobs (miner to ninja), fight hobgoblins, adopt pets and play mini-games — including a trading card mini-game with a real-world version in partnership with Topps. An optional premium account for \$4.99 a month grants access to exclusive jobs, extra items and quests.

- **Battlefield Heroes** (battlefieldheroes.com; ages 13-up). Revered PC shooter *Battlefield* has entered the free arena, signing up more than a million players since the "soft launch" last month. Publisher EA and studio DICE seek to create an experience more accessible than past entries in the series. *Heroes* launches from a Web browser; players create an account, customize their hero and enter a match. Pay small amounts for extra perks such as bonus experiences or outfits.

- **Disciple** (disciplemmo.com; not rated, for mature audiences). This free game, started in May, serves as a no-frills way to test-drive a fantasy MMO. Set in the violent world of Aphelion, you choose your warrior and put him (or her) into battles to gain experience. Earn or buy Geldors to purchase weapons and armor; a \$5.95 monthly subscription lets you start a clan and have more characters. Facebook connectivity launches this week, and an iPhone app is due this summer.

- **Quick Hit Football** (quickhit.com; expected for ages 13-up). Set to launch in September (register now for the test period), this is part fantasy football, part MMO. Some real-world football stars will be in the player pool, but most of your team of fictional players will have attributes to match the type of offense, defense and special teams you prefer. Later in the season, you'll be able to acquire new players using earned or purchased credits and upgrade your team with virtual equipment, film and workout rooms.