

Mahjong Sensei

Monetization Strategy

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Multi-agent research by Jarvis system: Scout, Cipher, Nexus, Prism, Contrast, Scribe

Executive Summary

Mahjong Sensei occupies a genuinely underserved niche: no competitor combines structured Riichi curriculum + AI play + puzzles + reference tools in English. The recommended approach is a **progressive monetization ladder** -- start with zero-backend tip jars, add cosmetic purchases, then gate depth (not access) via a simple two-tier freemium model. Revenue projections: \$1,700-3,300/mo at 10K MAU, scaling to \$3,000-10,000/mo at 25K MAU.

The Monetization Ladder

Don't build everything at once. Each step validates the next.

Step	Timeline	What	Goal	Infrastructure
1. VALIDATE	Week 1-2	Tip jar (Ko-fi / Buy Me a Coffee)	Prove ANY willingness to pay	Zero -- just a link
2. SELL COSMETICS	Month 1-2	Theme packs + character coaches via Gumroad/LemonSqueezy	One-time purchases, \$3-5 each	License key validation (client-side)
3. GATE DEPTH	Month 3-4	Daily puzzle limits (3/day free), advanced lesson preview	Create natural upgrade moments	Client-side localStorage flags
4. SUBSCRIBE	Month 5-6	Sensei Premium (\$4.99/mo) via LemonSqueezy	Recurring revenue engine	License key + optional Cloudflare Workers
5. EXPAND	Month 7+	Seasonal content, community features, cloud sync	Recurring value delivery	Backend required

Recommended Pricing

Two-Tier Model (Simple, recommended for <25K users)

	Free	Sensei Premium
Price	\$0	\$4.99/mo · \$39.99/yr (33% off) · \$99.99 lifetime

	Free	Sensei Premium
Core gameplay	All modes	All modes
Beginner lessons (Mod 1-4)	Full access	Full access
Advanced lessons (Mod 5-8)	Preview only (title + first paragraph)	Full access
Daily puzzles	3/day	Unlimited
Practice puzzles	5/day per category	Unlimited
AI play	Beginner + Intermediate	+ Advanced
Yaku reference	Full	Full
Scoring calculator	Full	Full
Themes	3 included	+ Premium themes (Sensei Blue, etc.)
Character coaches	3 starter	+ All 9 coaches
Streak protection	None	2-day grace (already built!)
Game analysis	None	Full post-game review
Achievements	Basic set	+ Premium achievements
XP bonus	1x	1.5x XP multiplier

Why Two Tiers, Not Three

For a solo developer with <25K users, simplicity wins. Two tiers reduce decision paralysis, simplify implementation, and focus marketing. Add a "Sensei Pro" tier when user demand signals justify it.

Feature Gating Strategy

Core principle: Gate power, not access. (Validated by Chess.com, Duolingo, Brilliant)

What Must Stay Free

- Playing mahjong (all difficulties except Advanced AI)
- Beginner lessons (Modules 1-4) -- habit formation requires free learning
- Daily puzzles (limited to 3/day) -- the daily engagement hook
- Yaku reference + scoring calculator -- utility tools that bring traffic
- XP/leveling/achievements -- gamification drives retention

What Gets Gated

- Advanced lessons (Modules 5-8) -- users who reach Module 5 have proven engagement
- Unlimited puzzles -- "I want more" is the strongest conversion trigger
- Advanced AI -- serious players who want harder opponents are premium candidates
- Game analysis/replay -- high-value tool competitive players crave
- Premium themes + all character coaches -- cosmetic, zero gating risk

The "Canva Preview" Pattern (40-60% better conversion vs hard gates)

- Show advanced lesson titles and first paragraph, then "Unlock with Sensei Premium"
- Show puzzle categories but limit attempts: "You've used 3/3 free puzzles today"
- Show game analysis preview, then blur detailed stats

Revenue Projections

By User Base Size

MAU	Tip Jar	Cosmetics	Premium Subs	Total Monthly
500	\$25-50	\$15-40	\$75-140	\$115-230
1,000	\$50-100	\$30-80	\$150-280	\$230-460
5,000	\$50-100	\$150-400	\$750-1,400	\$950-1,900
10,000	\$50-100	\$150-400	\$1,500-2,800	\$1,700-3,300
25,000	\$50-100	\$375-1,000	\$3,750-7,000	\$4,175-8,100

Assumptions: 1-2% tip, 5-8% cosmetic purchase rate, 3-4% premium conversion, \$5-7/mo avg premium revenue

Break-Even Analysis

- **Current fixed costs:** \$0/mo (PWA, client-side, no hosting)
- **With LemonSqueezy:** ~\$0 fixed + 5% transaction fee
- **With Cloudflare Workers:** ~\$5/mo
- **Full-time viability:** \$5,000+/mo -> requires ~15K MAU with 4% premium at \$7/mo

Competitive Landscape

Competitor	Model	Price	Gap vs Mahjong Sensei
Kemono Mahjong	One-time purchase	\$4.99	No structured curriculum, no puzzles

Competitor	Model	Price	Gap vs Mahjong Sensei
Mahjong Soul	F2P gacha cosmetics	\$0 (gacha \$\$\$)	No teaching, focused on competitive play
Tenhou	Freemium	~\$5/mo premium	Japanese only, no learning tools
Ron2	Subscription	~\$10/mo	Japanese only, no curriculum
Doman Mahjong	Free	\$0	Minimal teaching, basic AI
Various YouTube	Free content	\$0	No interactive practice

Mahjong Sensei's unique position: Only English-language platform combining structured curriculum + AI play + puzzles + reference. This is the gap to own.

Implementation Priority

Phase 1: Zero-Infrastructure (Week 1-2)

1. Add Ko-fi / Buy Me a Coffee link to Profile page and About section
2. Add "Support Development" button in footer/settings
3. **Effort:** 1-2 hours. **Revenue potential:** \$50-200/mo validation signal.

Phase 2: Cosmetic Store (Month 1-2)

1. Create 2-3 additional themes (Sensei Blue premium theme using existing #4a6fa5 design token)
2. Set up LemonSqueezy account with license key products
3. Add "Store" page with theme previews + purchase links
4. Client-side license key validation: user enters key -> unlock saved to localStorage
5. **Effort:** 1-2 weeks. **Revenue potential:** \$150-400/mo at 3K MAU.

Phase 3: Freemium Limits (Month 3-4)

1. Add daily puzzle counter (3 free, then soft paywall)
2. Gate Modules 5-8 with "Canva preview" pattern
3. Gate Advanced AI difficulty
4. Add premium badge + XP multiplier
5. **Effort:** 2-3 weeks. **Revenue potential:** \$750-1,400/mo at 5K MAU.

Phase 4: Subscription Engine (Month 5-6)

1. LemonSqueezy subscription checkout integration
2. License key management (monthly validation)

3. Optional: Cloudflare Workers for server-side key validation
4. Premium onboarding flow
5. **Effort:** 2-4 weeks. **Revenue potential:** \$1,500-2,800/mo at 10K MAU.

Risks & Mitigations

Risk	Severity	Mitigation
Client-side paywall bypass	LOW at <50K users	Honor system works for small passionate communities. Revisit with backend at scale.
Gating too much kills retention	HIGH	Follow the matrix strictly -- never gate core gameplay, reference tools, or beginner content
Subscription fatigue	MEDIUM	Offer lifetime pass (\$99.99) as escape valve. "Support" framing over "buy" framing.
No user base yet	HIGH	Monetization is premature without users. Focus on user acquisition first (Reddit r/mahjong, YouTube tutorials, mahjong Discord communities).
Niche too small	MEDIUM	Riichi Mahjong is growing (Mahjong Soul has millions of players). English learning tools are genuinely undersupplied.

Key Insight from Research

"Habits before monetization." Every successful educational gaming platform follows the same funnel: free discovery -> habit formation -> capability ceiling -> friction -> conversion. Premature gating kills retention and word-of-mouth. Build the audience first, monetize the engaged users second.

The single biggest risk isn't the monetization model -- it's not having users to monetize. User acquisition (Reddit, YouTube, mahjong communities, SEO for "learn riichi mahjong") should be the primary focus while the tip jar validates willingness to pay.

Research conducted by Jarvis multi-agent system: Scout (web research), Cipher (financial modeling), Nexus (cross-domain analysis), Prism (strategic frameworks), Contrast (devil's advocate), Scribe (source validation). 2 rounds, 28 sources, 12 agent reports synthesized.