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Understanding How and Why People Play Facebook Games

By [M. H. Phan](#) & [B. Chaparro](#)

Summary. The main goal of this study was to assess the general attitude, habit, and behavior of people who currently or previously played Facebook games. Of the 287 who completed the survey on Facebook games, over 70% indicated that they no longer play games on Facebook (i.e., past Facebook gamers). Respondents reported that the main reasons they stopped playing a Facebook game was due to boredom with the game, the game was too time-consuming, and real-world money and more friends were needed for the game to be fun. When asked what features would be associated with the “ideal” Facebook game, many indicated features such as faster loading time, quality graphics, game rewards, and an option to play the game without real-world money.

Note: This is a summary of the article “User Perceptions of Facebook Games” in the Proceedings of the Human Factors and Ergonomic Society, San Diego, CA 2013.

INTRODUCTION

The world of video games has changed since the rise of social network sites (e.g., MySpace, Facebook). These popular social networking sites have helped launch and popularize a new genre of video game called “social network” or “social” games. Social games are a type of online game in which one typically plays through a social networking site. In addition, social games place heavy emphasis around the multiplayer aspect and the connection/interaction of one player to other players (Chen, 2009). A distinct feature of social games is the asynchronous gameplay, which allows multiple players to play together without being present in the same time frame. Other features unique to social games are the exchange of real-world money for virtual money and the lack of a final ending or victory, which allows the players to play the game for as long as they like (Radoff, 2011).

Currently, social games are one of the fastest growing segments in the multi-billion dollar video game industry. Last year, it was reported that the growth of Facebook game players have increased over 15%, growing from 205 million to 235 million (Goddard, 2012). The number of people who spent money buying virtual gifts in Facebook games has also increased by 15 million within the last year (Darwell, 2013). Furthermore, a recent report revealed that almost half of Facebook gamers play games on Facebook at least once per day (Pidgeon, 2012).

Purpose

Given the continual growth and the enduring popularity of Facebook games, it is of interest for video game companies and game developers to understand the attitudes and behaviors of game players on Facebook. Thus, the objective of this study was to examine in detail the usage and preference of past and current Facebook gamers. Additionally, we hope to identify the main attractions of Facebook games, as well as the key challenges commonly found in Facebook games.

METHOD

Participants

A total of 287 reported to be current (71%) or past (29%) Facebook gamers. Many were college-age students ($M=22.08$ years, $SD=6.01$ years), ranging from 18 to 57 years old. The majority of these Facebook gamers were White (67%), single (61%), female (69%), and a full-time college student (93%) with a yearly income less than \$25,000 (72%). Additionally, many (55%) of these Facebook gamers also reported to play other video games outside of Facebook at least once a month, and only 18% reported to strictly play video games on Facebook.

Materials

A 54-item questionnaire about Facebook game usage and preference was used in this study. The survey asked basic demographic information and questions pertaining to Facebook games (e.g., How often do you play games on Facebook, What are the main reasons as to why you stopped playing a game on Facebook?). The survey also included 16 items about Facebook game behaviors and attitudes, which were adapted from a video game survey by Thornham (2008).

RESULTS

Results will first focus on the current Facebook gamers, then the past Facebook gamers, and finally the general usage and preference of all respondents who have played a game on Facebook.

Current Facebook Gamers

Approximately 29% ($n=83$) reported to currently play a Facebook game at the time they answered the survey. Of the 83 current Facebook gamers, 42% were active gamers who played at least once a day. On average, these gamers reported spending 2.49 hours per week ($SD=1.06$) playing games on Facebook. Additionally, each individual played around 2 games ($SD=1.52$) on Facebook, with some individuals playing as many as seven games.

Current Facebook gamers also reported playing a variety of games on Facebook. The three games that were frequently listed were SongPop (12%), FarmVille (10%), and Words with Friends (8%). In general, these individuals are likely to play Facebook games that fell into the following three categories: Simulation (e.g., FarmVille) (25%), Arcade/Puzzle (e.g., Tetris) (26%), and Other (e.g., SongPop) (28%). On average, the longest duration in which these gamers reported playing some Facebook games was approximately 12 months ($SD=14.01$). The two game titles many users reported playing the longest were FarmVille and SongPop.

In terms of the types of devices that these gamers typically used to play Facebook games, most reported using a laptop/netbook (47%), desktop computer (25%), and/or smartphone (19%). In addition, the three Internet browsers that current Facebook gamers used most frequently were Google Chrome (36%), Internet Explorer (29%), and Mozilla Firefox (23%). In addition, these individuals revealed that, on average, they had around 26 Facebook friends ($SD=31.17$) who played at least one of the games they currently play on Facebook. Furthermore, they reported that their game friends on Facebook primarily consisted of their offline friends (48%), which are friends they have met outside of the Internet, or family members and/or relatives (27%).

In relation to the general behavior of current Facebook gamers and their gaming attitude, these respondents were asked to evaluate 16 Facebook game statements using a 5-point Likert scale (1=Strongly Disagree; 5=Strongly Agree). Overall, results revealed that these gamers tended to play Facebook games during evenings and weekends. They also tended to view Facebook games as not being very immersive, and do not play them for long periods of time. While many generally indicated that they do not feel guilty when they play games on Facebook, many agreed that they do have better things to do with their time than to play Facebook games. Last but not least, these individuals were less likely to see themselves continuing to play Facebook games in the future.

Past Facebook Gamers

Approximately 71% ($n=204$) of Facebook gamers reported no longer playing games on Facebook at the time they completed the survey. When asked to list the game title that these individuals spent the longest time playing on Facebook, many listed FarmVille (42%), and the average duration in which they spent playing these games was around 4 months ($SD=4.71$). When asked for the most recent game title these individuals played before they stopped playing Facebook games, the majority reported it to be FarmVille (30%). The average duration in which past Facebook gamers spent playing their most recent game title is around 3 months ($SD=3.34$). Moreover, when asked to rate on a 7-point Likert scale (1=Very Unlikely; 7=Very Likely) in terms of how likely these individuals would start playing Facebook games again, most ($M=2.24$, $SD=1.51$) indicated that they were unlikely to play Facebook games again.

Why Do People Start and Stop Playing Facebook Games?

The 287 respondents who reported currently playing or previously playing Facebook games

were asked to indicate the main reasons they started playing as well as stopped playing some games on Facebook. The top three reasons for starting to play a Facebook game were boredom, received game invitations from Facebook friends, and saw many Facebook friends playing a game. Table 1 provides a more detailed list of the reasons.

Table 1. Main Reasons for Starting to Play a Game on Facebook (Responses=712)

Reason	Percentage
Boredom	28%
Received an invitation from Facebook friends	26%
Saw many Facebook friends playing	21%
Read/heard good reviews	7%
Saw advertisements of the game	7%
Game company recognition	4%
Liked the graphics	4%
Miscellaneous (e.g., thought a Facebook game looks fun)	2%

Note: Respondents could select more than one answer for this question.

In addition, the top reasons why these respondents stopped playing a game on Facebook included being bored with it, the game was too time-consuming, the game required real-world money for it to be fun, and not having enough friends on Facebook who played the same game (see Table 2). The three games the respondents frequently reported that they have stopped playing are all Zynga's games: FarmVille (32%), FishVille (7%), and Mafia Wars (7%). Of the Facebook games that had been dropped, 64% could be categorized under the Simulation category (e.g., FarmVille, FishVille). Finally, many reported that the longest duration in which they have quit playing a Facebook game was either at least a year (39%) or several months (35%).

Table 2. Main Reasons for No Longer Playing a Game on Facebook (Responses=616)

Reason	Percentage
Bored with the game	34%
Game was too time-consuming	20%
Game required real-world money for it to be fun	11%
Not enough friends played the game	10%
Too many bugs/glitches in the game	7%
Found a better game on Facebook	6%
Game did not have new updates	4%
Game was too easy	3%
Miscellaneous (e.g., annoyed with game requests/invitations)	3%
Game was too difficult	1%

Stopped using Facebook	1%
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Note: Respondents could select more than one answer for this question.

Facebook Game Cash/Credits

Of the 287 respondents who reported playing a game on Facebook, 8% ($n=24$) reported to use real-world money to purchase Facebook game cash/credits. In terms of how frequently these individuals purchased Facebook game cash/credits, the majority (79%) indicated it was not very often (i.e., a few times per year, less than a few times per year, or only once). On average, they reported to spend \$24.25 ($SD=\26.32) per year on Facebook game cash/credits. Additionally, these individuals reported that the most amount of money they have ever spent on a single purchase was \$17.54 ($SD=\21.82).

Approximately 27% ($n=76$) reported that they had completed an advertisement request on Facebook to earn game cash/credits. Many (70%) of these individuals also indicated that completing advertisement requests is not something they did very often (i.e., a few times per year or less than a few times per year). The three most common advertisement requests they reported to complete were to watch a video (37%), complete an online survey (36%), and download/try an app (36%). Furthermore, a chi-square test of goodness-of-fit showed significantly more respondents completed an advertisement requests ($n=63$) than spent real-world money ($n=11$), or performed both activities ($n=13$) to obtain Facebook game cash/credits.

Other Facebook Game-Related Activities

The respondents were asked to select which sharing setting on Facebook they mainly used to share their Facebook game-related posts (e.g., posts generated by a game to request help or show achievements). Forty-five percent (45%) of the respondents indicated that they did not share any posts generated by Facebook games, while others used the "Friends (Only)" (28%), "Custom" (8%), or "Public" (8%) setting. When asked if they ever used a customized sharing setting to restrict the Facebook game-related posts among the friends who play Facebook games, many reported "No" (40%) or that they did not know that such a task was possible to do on Facebook (36%).

In addition, these individuals were asked how often they engaged in the following activities on Facebook: visit a Facebook game's community forum, visit a Facebook game's help page/section, visit the wall of a game on Facebook, and send a game invitation to someone on Facebook. Overall, results reveal that respondents were not likely to engage in any of the four mentioned activities very often (see Figure 1).

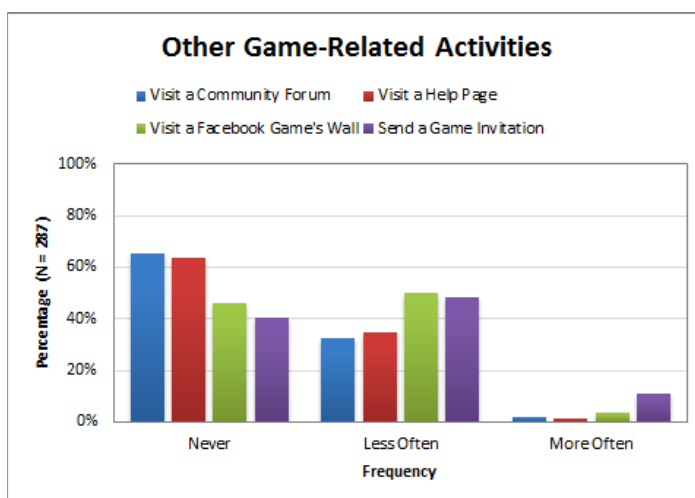


Figure 1. Frequency of involvement in other game-related activities.

Content Analysis of What People Liked and Disliked About the Games on Facebook

In order to examine the main attractions and problems with Facebook games, respondents were asked to list 1 to 5 things they liked and disliked about the games that they currently played or

have played on Facebook. All “N/A” or “Don’t know” responses were eliminated from the final list. Each response was then categorized into groups in order to look for patterns.

Respondents reported that some of the main things they liked about Facebook games were that the games were fun or entertaining, allowed them to play with their friends or other people on Facebook, provided a good way for them to waste some time, and were easy to play/control. Some of the major things respondents reported to dislike about Facebook games were that the games became too time-consuming to play, needed real-world money for games to be fun/worthwhile, had too many bugs and glitches, and quickly became boring. Table 3 and Table 4 summarize the categories of likes and dislikes about games on Facebook.

Table 3. Categories of Likes about Facebook Games (Responses=615)

Like Category	Percentage
Entertainment Value	17%
Social Connection	17%
Escapism (e.g., waste time, being in a different world)	16%
Ease of Play	13%
Special Features (e.g., good music, customization)	7%
Challenging	6%
Appearance (e.g., cute, colorful, good graphics)	5%
Game Type (e.g., simulation game, word games)	4%
Miscellaneous (e.g., annoyed with game requests/invitations)	3%
Achievements-Related (e.g., having goals to work towards)	3%
Ease of Access	2%
Miscellaneous (e.g., good way to safely play an online game)	2%
Creativity	2%
Price	2%
Game Story & Missions	2%
Variety (e.g., different types of games offered on Facebook)	1%

Note: Respondents could write more than one answer for this question.

Table 4. Categories of Dislikes about Facebook Games (Responses=573)

Dislike Category	Percentage
Time Related (e.g., time consuming, too much downtime)	21%
Cost Related	13%
Functionalities (e.g., load slow, bugs and glitches)	11%
Boredom	10%

Notifications	7%
Game Play (e.g., too easy/simple, too many quests)	7%
Friend-Dependents (e.g., needs friends or neighbors to progress)	6%
Distraction	6%
Repetitive	6%
Spams & Securities	5%
Miscellaneous (e.g., not as good as console games)	4%
Game Quality (e.g., poor graphics, poor music)	3%

Note: Respondents could write more than one answer for this question.

The “Ideal” Facebook Game

Finally, respondents were asked to select the essential features that they would want to include in an “ideal” Facebook game. They were asked to select as many features as they wanted. The top four essential features included fast loading time, good graphics, game rewards, and an option to play game without needing real-world money. Table 5 provides a complete list of essential features.

Table 5. Essential Features of the “Ideal” Facebook Game (Responses=2942)

Essential Feature	Percentage
Fast loading time	9%
Good graphics	8%
Game rewards	6%
Option to play without needing real-world cash	6%
Challenging missions/quests	6%
Option to play game without adding friends	6%
Competition	5%
Option to easily customize privacy settings	5%
Customization of characters’ appearance	5%
Music	5%
Sound effects	5%
Option to name characters	5%
Option to socialize with other players	4%
Discovery/exploration	4%
In-depth storyline	4%

Option to build relationships with other characters in the game	3%
Help/tutorial	3%
Teamwork	3%
Option to hear the characters' voice	3%
Option to share game rewards/accomplishments	2%
Cheat options	2%

Note: Respondents could select more than one answer for this question.

DISCUSSION

The main objective of this study was to examine in detail the usage and preference of people who currently play and/or used to play games on Facebook. Overall, we found the majority of Facebook game players were females, which is consistent with previous research (Information Solutions Group, 2010; Phan, Jardina, Hoyle, & Chaparro, 2012). Furthermore, we found social connection to be one of the strongest appeals of Facebook games, and this is consistent with findings from a recent study that investigated the main attractions of social games (Chen, Shen, & Ma, 2012).

Surprisingly, we found over 70% of Facebook gamers reported to no longer play Facebook games at the time of the survey, which is inconsistent with previous reports of the growth of Facebook game users (e.g., Goddard, 2012; Constine, 2012). However, this could be due to the population of our respondents being primarily college students. Interestingly, cost is a recurrent theme that appeared throughout the survey responses. Specifically, many players mentioned that they disliked the emphasis on paying real-world money for Facebook games to be fun, and that the money requirement for games to be fun was among the top reasons why they stopped playing.

Future studies should examine the usage and preference of Facebook gamers among a more diverse population (e.g., wider range of age and income level). Also, it was previously mentioned by Facebook's Director of Growth, Alex Schultz, that the majority of Facebook games can be categorized into three major groups: Hits (games that instantly become popular, but also quickly lose their popularity), Successes (popular games that are stable in retaining most users over time), and Awesome (games that started out as not popular, but then become more popular over time) (Constine, 2012). It would be interesting to investigate the characteristics that differ among these three game categories.

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