Workshop: game design for social networks

ARTICLE · SEPTEMBER 2009

DOI: 10.1145/1621841.1621889

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Workshop: Game Design for Social Networks

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ABSTRACT

Game Design for Social Networks is a one-day workshop where the participants will learn about creating and designing game concepts for online social networking platforms, such as Facebook and Twitter. The workshop will center around exercises that enable participants to come up with new game concepts. Participants will also be able to bring existing ideas to the workshop, and have a chance to refine them through the analytical design approaches introduced throughout the day. This paper outlines the theoretical backgrounds of the workshop.

Categories and Subject Descriptors

D.2.10 [Software] Design – Methodologies

General Terms

Design, Human Factors, Theory

Keywords

Game design, interaction design, social media, social networks, Facebook, Twitter

1. INTRODUCTION

As online social networks, such as Facebook, Myspace, or Twitter, have become increasingly popular, an increasing number of games have found their way into these platforms. Facebook applications attract millions of users per monthly basis, and game applications frequently reach the top 10 popularity lists of the platform [see http://www.appdata.com]. Furthermore, social media experts are claiming that social media games are threatening the market of so-called casual games, due to, e.g., their virality, accessibility, and scalability [1].

2. DESIGN RESEARCH INTO SOCIAL GAMES

This makes 'social games', e.g. game applications played via one's Facebook account, a topical subject for game-related design research. In the case of the workshop, this constitutes research that focuses into games as design objects that consist of a number of design choices. The research tries to conceptualize the similarities and differences of such design objects in order to inform and inspire future design solutions.

In terms of design practices, developing games for social networks is not only about creating the rules and dynamics of the game. The design needs to take account how the game is embedded into the social network and its constraints and possibilities, including user motivations and behaviors. This is where interaction design as a discipline comes in. Interaction design can contribute methods, such as use scenarios and use flow specification, into the design of social network games.

2.1 Translating user motivations into design drivers for networked play

In the author's research [2], five different aspects of social networks in terms of play have been established as so-called design drivers. They are based on analyzing both user motivations regarding online social networks, and popular game applications in the said networks.

The resulting five drivers are sociability, spontaneity, symbolic physicality, narrativity, and asynchronicity. They articulate aspects that can be used as springboards when creating a game concept in the context of social networks.

In commercial contexts, design drivers should be translated from the business goals of the project, and consequently, they should be used to guard and maintain the design goals throughout the project, so that any major iteration in the concept is evaluated in terms of its consequence to the goals. The workshop aims at providing a design framework that takes these aspects into consideration form the start.

3. GAME CONCEPT CREATION

In the author's ten-year experience of working with game design and development, ideas for games can come from multiple sources: themes, images, stories, events, other games, and so on. On the other hand, they seldom come from formal models – yet, formal models can help in structuring the original idea into the form of a game, with its rule procedures, mechanics, and player interactions. This is where the actual, time-consuming design work begins.

The workshop proceeds from a game mechanics-driven ideation into a formal design framework. The work starts from defining simple, playful interactions that would constitute the core fun aspect of the game. Only after that is the topic or theme of the game addressed. Starting from the opposite dimension, the theme, presents another approach, but for the purposes of designing social games for online networks, the author argues for a game mechanic-driven approach. The design framework and method introduced in the workshop supports this approach. Working with such a framework yields concrete beginnings for game concept specifications that are detailed enough for an actual development project.

3.1 Design constraints & possibilities

The drivers introduced above can also be used as constraints for creative brainstorming work at the start of the project. In this kind

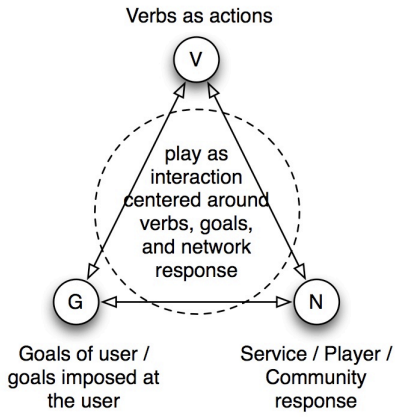
of design work, the goal is to create game mechanics – i.e. verbs for the players to take actions – in such ways that when players execute them, they become expressions of user's motivations.

However, as pointed out, with projects such as Facebook game applications, it is not only the so-called 'core mechanics' of the game [5] that make the game engaging, but it is also the network around it. Therefore, a service design approach [see, e.g. 4] is required: The play moments need to be placed into the overall service path, and the users' 'touchpoints' to the application become crucial for its propagation in the network. Therefore in the workshop, this aspect of the design is tackled as well. Expanding the design from the game into desiging the service path also helps in designing the business model of the game, as the potential revenue streams can be identified in the use flows that model the users' paths of interaction between the game application, other users, and the network.

The workshop introduces three models, which help in taking the original idea into a more detailed concept. Two of them are briefly covered in the following:

3.2 Model for identifying social network game mechanics

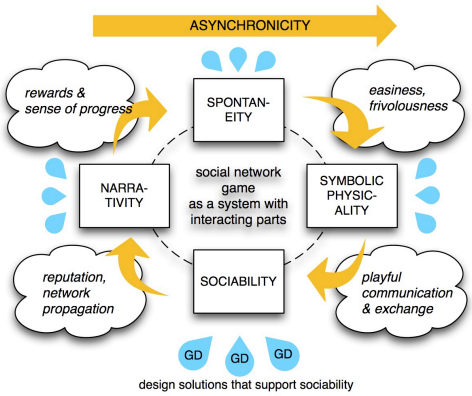
For designing game mechanics for networked play, the Verbs – Goals – Network model (pictured below) helps in thinking about the repeated cycle of interactions that players take between the application, their friends, and the rest of the network:



In the workshop, this model is used to brainstorm simple game dynamics: How players take actions (as verbs) towards game goals, and how the network gives feedback of those actions.

3.3 Model for designing networked play

The model below visualizes how the five design drivers introduced earlier can be connected into specific design constraints that emerge due to the fact that what we are designing is a game, rather than a utility application. This model is used to analyze and further develop the ideas for game mechanics created with the help of the VGN model above:



In order for the game mechanic design to emerge into a more complete social game concept, it needs to be able to answer a set of questions this model poses – for example:

- What kind of asynchronicity is there in the game, i.e. how do the mechanics relate to, e.g., Facebook users who log in and out a number of times a day?
- How does the social graph of the user's friends figure in the game? How do players interact with each other in the game?
- How does the game support spontaneous commitment to the game? Can a player just play once a day and still get a sense of progress?
- What kind of stories does the game send across the network as notifications? What is the game about?

These questions will both expand the concept, but also aim to further elaborate a shared design vision for the game, as they are decided upon and documented as part of the concept.

4. EVALUATION

The workshop concludes with evaluation of the concepts created by the participants. The evaluation aims to identify possible challenges and blind spots in the concept, both in terms of game play substance and technical implementation aspect. The goal is to identify the main tasks and points of attention for further specification work.

5. REFERENCES

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