

DISTANCE 01

Commentary & Discussion as of Feb. 17, 2012

Distance is a quarterly publication containing long essays about major issues in design and technology. After an issue is released, we pay careful attention to our readers' commentary. Some of our favorite comments are quoted below, and our authors can join the conversation if they desire.

This is a living document. We're approaching the discussion around our essays with the long run in mind, so we update this document as new commentary comes in. If you'd like to write directly to us, or direct us to a place where you've written in public, please email we@distance.cc with your thoughts. We'd love you to join the conversation.

– Nick Disabato, *editor*

Benjamin Jackson: **Hard Fun**

Tim Sims, *comment on excerpt at* <http://www.theatlantic.com/technology/archive/2012/01/the-zynga-abyss/251920/>:

A good game can create a creative space for people to play.

One of the hopes of early MMOs for example was that they would create virtual places with discrete rules to make them fair and provide some sort of reward/feedback mechanism, but also allow people a lot of room to make their own rules, provide their own rewards and essentially allow the game to emerge in a way that rewarded and required some creativity. To some extent this goal has been achieved in efforts like Ultima Online, Star Wars: Galaxies, EVE Online, etc, but not enough to get out of the shadow of the skinner box games like Everquest and World of Warcraft.

If you read some of the very thoughtful blogging from an MMO pioneer like Raph Koster, he was very focused on creating these virtual spaces more

`than he was in creating a discreet gaming experience. Sadly, his kind have been shoved into a corner, and even Raph now concedes that immersion and depth have very little financial value in the MMO sphere, and as such, are becoming or have become extinct.

When it comes down to it, Zynga makes the games they make not because they are truly the highest expression of gaming, but because they are the shortest path between effort and reward, both for the players and the developers.

Alex Duryee, *ibid.*:

[...]game design, going back to early board games, shows that limiting options often encourages creative thought. Consider chess, except all the pieces are queens - the game would be markedly less interesting than it is now, where certain pieces do certain things (and many worse than others). As anyone that's played with cheat codes knows, being God is fun for about ten minutes, until the realization that any interesting problems are gone sinks in.

Douglas Dea, *ibid.*:

The creativity comes in defining your goals and how exactly you achieve those goals.

“selenesmom”, *ibid.*:

I thought most people who played Zynga games knew that they are mostly thinly veiled attempts to get you to spam other people.

Also, when I played one for a while, I joined a circle of new “friends” specifically to trade game tokens, interactions, and requests with, so that I didn’t have to embarrass myself bothering my real friends with this stuff. (In fact, I had to drop one of the game friends because she kept trying to send me unrelated political and joke chain mail.) I thought almost everyone did this. Who is going to risk a real relationship by pestering them with requests for “special kitten hearts” or doing something about your “crop circle”?

Joe Hill, “Get Yer Game On,” <http://joehillfiction.com/2012/01/ger-yer-game-on/>:

Nor do I necessarily think the game habit is inherently bad in-and-of-itself, just as I don’t assume an hour spent reading every day is inherently good. For example: there’s a huge difference between spending an hour reading political blogs, and getting yourself worked up in a lather over people who disagree with you, and spending an hour with your feet up, reading Adam Smith’s *the Wealth of Nations*, or David Mitchell’s *The Cloud Atlas*, or Elmore Leonard’s *Raylan*.

So too, as Ben’s article, “The Zynga Abyss,” suggests, not all games are equal: some are as intellectually refreshing as a good hard jog, while others amount to the mental equivalent of eating Doritos in your underwear in front of reality TV... a sad, maybe even vaguely destructive waste of your limited time on the planet.

Luke Plunkett, “Why *Farmville* Turns Humans Into Lab Rats,” <http://kotaku.com/5879043/why-farmville-turns-humans-into-lab-rats>:

They are not games. They are specifically-engineered programs designed to take your money and compel you to advertise the product to your friends so they can do it. And so on. It's like hard labour, breaking rocks, only instead of doing it in prison you're doing it at home, and somehow feeling compelled to tell all your friends about it just because the rocks are covered in cute farm animals.

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“Blyr”, *comment on ibid.*:

It's the same thing with gamers in general, really.

Why do people get so defensive over their games? Why do people get so defensive over *companies*? Because we've been brainwashed into having the same feelings of belonging and ownership to a soulless corporation as we do our favorite sports team.

We see products, and owners of other products as fellow fans of our team, and when someone bashes that, you can't stand for it!

We spread the word about our products, and desperately try to get others to buy them, so they can be like us. Be on our side, and in the process, help our side "win".

Farmville is just the smallest, most easy to scrutinize form of this. Farmville is just making a mint on what businesses do already: use the social aspect of human nature to turn a profit.

Jon Whipple: **What Designers Know**

Nothing yet – write to us at we@distance.cc with your thoughts!

Vitorio Miliano: **Local Communities In Practice and By Design**

Alex Jones, *correspondence with the author*:

While I may be a bit biased, I do think it important to note that Refresh Austin was highly design-focused during this time period. This was due in large part because there was a very apparent gap in design content and community. As the design-focused groups formed and grew, Refresh was able to shift to cover a wider set of topics. So, while the group wasn't dedicated to design, it felt like the only group addressing the needs before 2009 and a high percentage of the meeting topics were design-oriented.

Another note - the Web Design meetup met for a while, but lacked structure, and so it never flourished, though it had a large amount of interest. Ryan Joy has redirected it to Refresh to ensure that people had at least one place to go.

Llewyn Paine posted a series of entries about the data in Vitorio's essay at:

- <http://llewyn.com/2012/02/06/researching-our-communities-whos-coming-to-design-events-and-why/>
- <http://llewyn.com/2012/02/07/researching-our-communities-part-2-overall-community-profile/>
- <http://llewyn.com/2012/02/08/researching-our-communities-part-3-lunches-happy-hours-workshops/>
- <http://llewyn.com/2012/02/09/researching-our-communities-part-4-presentations-panels/>
- <http://llewyn.com/2012/02/10/researching-our-communities-part-5-field-trips-recommendations/>

Austin's design organizations have hosted a wide array of events, including presentations, many happy hours, tables for eight, panels, lunches, and workshops. Each appeals to different types of people who want to accomplish different things at these meetings, and professionally.

[...]

In essence, [this analysis] allows me to take a user-centered design approach to event planning. But this information also has value for

attendees. If your primary interest is marketing, you may want to focus on trying to make it to field trips, as there seems to be a higher percentage of folks with marketing skills interested in attending this type of event.