

How Social Gaming uses Optionalism as an Illusion for Gameplay

Arnè Übelhör
School of Computer Science,
University of Lincoln, UK
Email: ubelhor3000@gmail.com

ABSTRACT

Social gaming has risen in popularity and become a billion dollar industry, yet is the focus of few studies. This project focuses on exploring current thoughts and understanding of social games, particularly the thoughts of Dr Ian Bogost who explored concerning concepts of social gaming in an article (2010a). Notably he mentioned the term optionalism, describing gameplay as being very rote and empty.

Exploring optionalism further, links were made to time and failure as components of social games which facilitates optionalism. Moving from the theoretical understanding to that of practical implementations, a social game was developed involving these concepts along with an integrated survey to gauge the opinions of audiences.

Concluding that optionalism spawns from two components: a soft punishment and a minimal time-engagement, these contribute to the gameplay being empty. Optionalism creates an illusion of gameplay to the player.

KEYWORDS

Optionalism, Social Games, Facebook, Social Network Game, Web Games, Free-to-Play, Viral

INTRODUCTION

A consensus on a definition of a social game is difficult for a genre so young; an article by Sandi Chen (2009) defined it not on the genre, but rather a specific market. Social games increment the casual game genre, integrating social mechanics to the gameplay which sparks the viral popularity synonymous with social gaming.

Facebook has roughly 1,310,000,000 monthly active users (Statistic Brain, 2014), a conglomerate which has been in operation since 2004. The social network has been a source for some of the most successful social games ever made, for instance Farmville (Zynga, 2009) reaching 80 million monthly active users in 2010 (Mack, 2010). However, there has been relatively little study into the design and experience of social games as an industry and game genre.

The success achieved by the genre sparked interesting debate behind the constructing mechanisms underlining these games. Jesper Juul mentions “Social networking sites like Facebook provide another opportunity for playing video games” (2009a, 149), although he doesn’t quite define social game as their own genre but he instead highlights their difference.

Bogost is a professor of Interactive Computing at Georgia Institute of Technology who openly discusses and deconstructs social games. Leading to a game theory seminar at New York University, Bogost looked into the popularity of social gaming and its differences to traditional games concepts. In a blog post, Bogost (2010a) highlighted some repeating methodologies that appear in popular social games that are cause for concern.

Optionalism is prominent feature of social games, a key construction of their mechanics and nuances. Understanding how optionalism relates to game systems, will construct an understanding with which social games can fully grasp its relation to its audience.

SOCIAL GAMING AND ITS ROOTS

On average users spend approximately 18 minutes on Facebook per session (Statistic Brain, 2014). This leads to social games needing to provide entertainment in very short bursts of time. With the lack of time engagement, it disassociates itself from complex game interactions. Due to this time constraint social games use techniques like asynchronous play and persistent worlds. Asynchronous play allows players to play with each other without the need to be online at the same time, reducing the effort at which social play commences. Persistent worlds reduces the commitment needed from players, the game world exists without player involvement.

Games played on social networking sites don’t have any preliminary charge to access the content, unlike console games like Call of Duty: Ghosts (Infinity Ward, 2013) which currently has a recommended retail price of £49.99. Instead, social games use a micro-payment method to retrieve profits, often called free-to-play. A drawback to using a free-to-play model means profit is only

reached from a small percentage of players, an article by Pascal Luben (2011) pointed out “*Only five to 10 percent of the registered users make any purchases*”. Inclusivity is instrumental to constructing a healthy ecosystem of players and to keep the game profitable. This mentality is key to the reason social games are designed in the manner they are, they accentuate easy mechanics. Social games by design, aren’t difficult as they need to appeal to as many players as possible in order to attract enough players to be viable.

With social gaming expanding, discussions about the games influences to players are surfacing. Bogost (2010a) deconstructs the social gaming industry and relays his thoughts of optionalism, what is it and how it affects the players?

DEFINING OPTIONALISM

Bogost (2010a) discusses thoughts on extrapolating perceptions on the negative aspects of social gaming by creating a satirical game called Cow Clicker (Bogost, 2010b). Bogost then explains concepts behind the game in an article, where he describes optionalism.

“The gameplay in social games is almost entirely optional. The play acts themselves are rote, usually mere actuations of operations on expired timers. And then more so, even the enacting of those rote manoeuvres can be skipped, through delegation or (more often) by spending cash money on objects or actions. Social games are games you don't have to play.” - (Bogost, 2010a)

Bogost gives a very empty definition of optionalism however; the idea that the gameplay is rote would insinuate that it lacks elements that make the gameplay meaningful.

Social games base most of their networking features on social platforms, typically Facebook. 48% of Facebook users check the site when they wake up (Statistic Brain, 2014). Facebook creates a habitual interaction for its users and social games just feed off that cycle, using mechanics that don’t dismember this rhythm. Considering the miniscule 18 minutes users on average spend on Facebook, games can’t dominate with the persistence they would traditionally have, resulting in a time engagement which is very concentrated.

Although time constructs a fuller picture of optionalism, it doesn’t coherently describe the nature of which users interact with the mechanics in social games. In an essay by Jesper Juul (2009b) he describes failure as a key component to games: “*failure adds content by making the player see new nuances in a game*”. Relating this back to optionalism, does the movement to a softer

evaluation of player performance social gaming construct a new state of engagement with the player?

Whilst not fully encompassing social gaming, Jesper Juul defines punishment elements of game structures vital. Referring back to the quote Bogost first mentioned optionalism, “*The gameplay in social games is almost entirely optional*” (Bogost, 2010a), this can only really relate to the inability of definitive failure within social games.

Optionalism encompasses an apparent system within social gaming, but defining it has proved to be relatively unexplored. However, deconstructing optionalism highlights a few reoccurring themes:

- **Time:** relating more to the users interaction with social games, time is a key influence in understanding the mechanics lack of complexity and engagement.
- **Failure:** social games don’t have an absolute failure state rather a series of smaller setbacks which means a player can never ‘loose’ in an definitive sense.

Social gaming as a medium has created a leap in the understanding of player interaction with games, going against a lot of the ‘traditional’ practices established. Optionalism, in its current understanding could be refined to: the consideration of user’s time limitations and soft failure states to engage an audience.

METHOD

In order to investigate the concept of optionalism, and the players' reactions to the same, social games themselves are a very appropriate tool. Creating a social game will allow for a first-hand understanding of optionalism, generating practical concepts. From what is known about optionalism, there are two main constructs: time and failure, exploring this into a social game will be key to a better understanding of the idea.

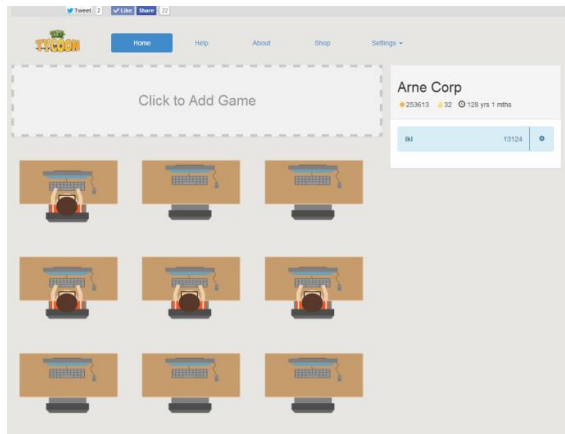
The aims and objectives of the project provides a basic platform for the project and converting them to a concise definitions will provide the catalyst for development. From the aims and objectives the two main forces for the artefact are as follows:

- **Demonstration:** The artefact needs to utilise the two components of optionalism, time and failure. The artefact needs to relate with other social games and have some relation to their processes.
- **Suitable candidates:** The ability to capture data from candidates that typically play social games. Absorbing opinions and thoughts of the audience of social games will help establish

more about optionalism and its relation to the users.

Translating these factors further to a more tangible set of demands, the project is split into two focuses. The first being the development of an artefact, which needs to represent social gaming and also implement the concepts of optionalism. The second is the capturing of user data and thoughts to further understand optionalism.

IMPLEMENTATION



The social games industry, although popular, provokes thought from traditional games developers. Social games are perceived as an institutionalised method for producing games, social games are represented as a very mechanical process, rather than the traditional creative process. With the expanse of social gaming there has risen this institutionalised method for creating games: copy, build, release. With web based notoriously being easy to create, large studios run operations closer to a factory than a creative industry.

Focusing on representing the social gaming genre, the concept of a self-analytical game became apparent and desirable. A game which satirised itself would allow its audience to gauge a better understanding of the genre. A social game about making social games.

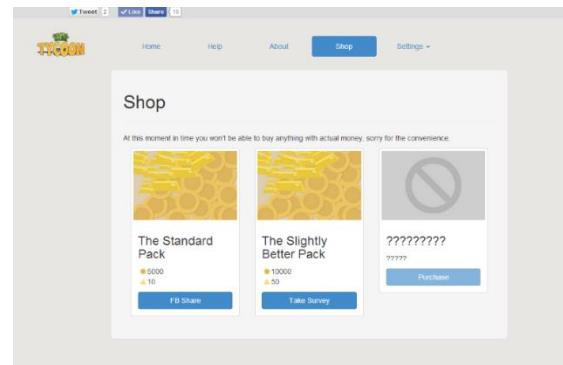
In the interest of simplicity and comedy, the process of making a social game won't be fully represented. Splitting the process into three stages will relate to the industry but keep it simple enough to be engaging. The stages are:

- **Pre-Production:** The creation of the game idea, taking into account the differences in social games as the factors for creating a new game.
- **Development:** Using the famous clicking mechanic used in games like Farmville 2 will be the bases of this stage. Having the employees act like crop which the user will

just task with jobs and collect their work after a time span.

- **Post-Production:** After the game is developed it will launch and begin earning a profit, this being the main mechanism for earning money in the game. This will be an opportunity for the player to manage the game as well, adding features to game which will affect popularity.

Using AngularJS and Firebase as the basis for the social game structure, a functioning game was created and launched.



Using the created social game, players contributed to the information about engagement habits. Linking the artefact with the survey meant that the sample of users who responded to the survey, were social game players. The choice to integrate it as part of shop screen, allowed the survey to engage with an audience willing to explore purchasing virtual currency. Engagement was also rewarded with in-game currency, this was to attract and encourage participation.

ANALYSIS OF COLLECTED DATA

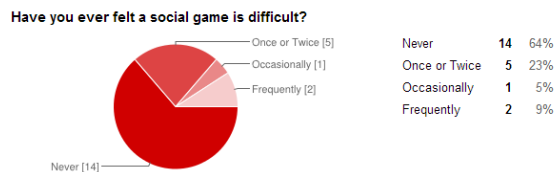
How long do you usually play social games per day?

00: __: __	00:14:00	00:30:00	00:15:00
01: __: __	01:01:03		
02: __: __	02:00:00		
04: __: __	04:00:00		

This question was programmed to only appear if users didn't select the option which said they didn't play social games. From this 28% of the participants were met with this question (6 participants), with the most common being between 14 and 30 minutes.

This data becomes very informative when looking at the next question, 'What are some of the recent social games you've played?' which gives an indication of the games participants refer to when discussing social games.

Looking at the data from the participants who play social games, it is clear that there is confusion to what constitutes a social game. With some references to games like League of Legends (Riot Games, 2009) and Rise of Mythos (GameFuse, 2012), which aren't social games. The two non-social game entries both also relate to the higher time-commitment entries, which would suggest that time that participants engage with social games typically last between 14 to 30 minutes. This correlates with the concept that optionalism is associated with a limited time engagement.



Out of the responses collected a large 64% of participants have never experienced failure in social games. From the understanding of optionalism, it describes the expected outcome for how concepts of failure are implemented in social games. The question allows for an insight into the perception of failure, which shows that social games tend to lean towards having failure states that aren't definitive. Failure in social games often presents itself as a minor setback, a softer evaluation.

CONCLUSION

This paper has investigated the concept of optionalism as it affects the design of social games for online social networks (e.g. Facebook). From the theoretical and practical aspects of optionalism, there is a fuller understanding to how nuances of gaming can impact audiences. Initially optionalism was described as a negative aspect of social games, with it being a very rote method of interacting with a player, with little gameplay. From the understanding gathered from the research and created artefact, optionalism is a very complex and abstract mechanism. With the two components described as: a soft punishment and a minimal time-engagement, this creates an illusion of gameplay to the player.

Optionalism shows how games have moved from providing an experience contrived from the designers point of view to that on solely meeting the demands of mass audiences.

DISCUSSION

Jonathan Blow (Parkin, 2010) described in an interview with Gamasutra talking about social

gaming enforcing a new kind of gameplay, one where the gameplay is dull but the rewards are very saturated. He describes that the games that reward the players excessively have to have dull gameplay, so that the fixation comes from the reward rather than intriguing gameplay. This concept explains the motivations behind optionalism, it opens the concept for debate about how this affects players. Optionalism is a concept which plays an important aspect of how social games become so attractive to a large audience, the concept strikes at the very raw psychological interaction between players.

What is the gained understanding of optionalism within social games?

Optionalism spawns from two components: a soft punishment and a minimal time-engagement, these contribute to the gameplay being empty. Optionalism creates an illusion of gameplay to the player; it does this by substituting skill with increased rewards.

Optionalism is a very young concept and there is much to explore. With the new understanding of optionalism, there are further questions raised about the concept. Some further points to explore are as follows:

What psychological impact does optionalism have on its audience?

Does optionalism appear in other genres of gaming?

What role does optionalism have in monetisation of games?

Social gaming has opened the rich and diverse world of games to a mass market, although social games tend to lack any emotional gain or improvement they still serve a purpose. Social games are the Hollywood of the games industry, although it doesn't produce exceptional experiences, it does facilitate the notion of gaming as medium.

REFERENCES

Bogost, I. (2010a) *Cow Clicker: The Making of Obsession*. [blog entry] 21 July. Available from http://www.bogost.com/blog/cow_clicker_1.shtml [Accessed 31 October 2013].

Bogost, I. (2010b) *Cow Clicker*. [online game] Available from <https://apps.facebook.com/cowclicker/> [Accessed 25 April 2014].

Chen, S. (2009) *The Social Network Game Boom*. [online] Gamasutra. Available from: http://www.gamasutra.com/view/feature/4009/the_social_network_game_boom.php [Accessed 10 April 10].

GameFuse (2012). *Rise of Mythos*. [online game] GameFuse. Available from <http://www.gamefuse.com/rise-of-mythos> [Accessed 25 April 2014].

Infinity Ward. (2013) *Call of Duty: Ghosts*. [video game] Activision.

Juul, J. (2009a) *A Casual Revolution: Reinventing Video Games and their Players*. The MIT Press.

Juul, J. (2009b) Fear of Failing? The Many Meanings of Difficulty in Video Games. In: Mark J. P. Wolf & Bernard Perron (eds.) *The Video Game Theory Reader 2*. New York: Routledge, 237-252.

Luben, P. (2011) *The Design of Free-To-Play Games Part I*. [Online] Gamasutra. Available from: http://www.gamasutra.com/view/feature/6552/the_design_of_freetoplay_games.php [Accessed 10 April 2014].

Mack, C. (2010) *Top 25 Facebook Games For February, 2010*. [Online] Inside Social Games. Available from: <http://www.insidesocialgames.com/2010/03/02/top-25-facebook-games-for-february-2010/> [Accessed 10 April 2014].

Parkin, S. (2010) *Catching Up With Jonathan Blow*. [online] Gamasutra. Available from http://www.gamasutra.com/view/feature/134595/catching_up_with_jonathan_blow.php [Accessed 25 April 2014].

Riot Games (2009). *League of Legends*. [video game] Riot Games.

Statistic Brain (2014) *Statistic Brain: Facebook Statistics*. [online] Statistic Brain. Available from <http://www.statisticbrain.com/facebook-statistics/> [Accessed 25 April 2014].

Zynga (2009) *Farmville*. [online game] Zynga. Available from <http://zynga.com/game/farmville> [Accessed 25 April 2014].