
Social Game Studies at CHI 2011

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Abstract

“Social games”, defined as games played and distributed on Social Networks, have become a digital gaming phenomenon. The most popular games boast tens of millions of users each month, employing simple mechanics to reach a vast new audience that was apparently under-served by traditional digital games. Their enormous success raises important academic questions about game design, interface design, psychology and the social power of online networks.

Social Game Studies at CHI 2011 is a one-day workshop at CHI 2011 that will bring together the CHI community with an inter-disciplinary mix of researchers and practitioners to share findings and explore the issues surrounding this emerging area of research into social games, and highlight the key questions, opportunities and challenges for future academic study.

Keywords

Social games, social networks, game studies, game design

ACM Classification Keywords

K.8.0 [Personal Computing]: Games, J.4 [Social and Behavioral Sciences]: Psychology, Sociology

General Terms

Design, Human Factors, Measurement

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Introduction

When Electronic Arts simultaneously announced the acquisition of social game developer PlayFish for US\$ 300m. US\$ and a global layoff of 1,500 workers on November 9, 2009, it became clear to industry insiders that social games – games played and distributed on social network sites – were more than a fad [3]. In February 2010, the Facebook game FarmVille peaked with over 83m monthly active users only eight months after its launch [7]. According to one source, the current global audience of social games has surpassed 500m monthly active users; another market study shows that about 20 percent of the U.S. population has played a game on a social network in the past three months [9], while consumer spending on social games rose from only US\$ 76m in 2008 to US\$ 639m in 2009 and is expected to grow to \$1.5 billion in 2014 [8].

Possibly the most exciting feature of social games is the nature of their players. Among the hundreds of millions of players, social games have a strong appeal to those who are not the traditional audience for computer and video games. According to recent research [1], the average FarmVille player is 31 (33% over 35) and as likely to be female as male (51%/49% respectively). This raises the obvious question what design features of social games appeal to this vast and new gaming audience.

Social Games have also challenged the traditional business models for digital games. The popular “freemium” business model treats games as *services* [5], where players access the game for free but may enhance their position through in-game purchase of virtual goods and services. This has in turn challenged the perception of games as artifacts, since developers

frequently evolve the games and interfaces quickly based on user feedback gathered from server logs in the form of behavior metrics.

These questions are all the more interesting as social games are often criticised for their ‘simplistic’, repetitive gameplay, and often sport surprisingly ‘mundane’ topics and themes like farming or cooking, with innumerable clones springing up once a game shows success. Are social games ‘just’ another form of “casual games” [6] with a new distribution platform? Or is their appeal explainable by the cooperative rather than competitive playing style afforded by most social games? How relevant are themes and game mechanics to the success of a social game anyhow – in relation to e.g. their “viral” marketing utilising the social network platform? And how might game mechanics support said viral distribution, or the high profitability of the underlying business model of micro-payments and virtual item sales [4]?

This leads directly to the relation of social games and social network sites as their ‘host’ platform. Social games use the network communication channels of their players to spread themselves among the players’ social networks, and they tie those networks directly into the gameplay. How are we to make sense of this intertwining of online ‘real-life’ identities, relations and interactions, and ‘in-game’ activity? For one, said intertwining has spurred critique on the commoditization of social relations and the exploitation of social instincts like reciprocity in social games. In light of this, is there a space for positive, pro-social uses of social games or “serious social games”?

Social Game Studies

As social games emerge as a topic worthy of study, researchers from different fields have begun working disparately on understanding the phenomenon. In July 2010, at the industry convention *Games Convention Online* in Leipzig, Germany, the Hans Bredow Institute for Media Research hosted the first *Social Game Studies* workshop. It convened researchers and practitioners from various disciplines to discuss and collate the current state of research in the field.

The outcome of this was a report on the current state of social games research [2] and the construction of a central repository for information on current and future research in social games, socialgamestudies.org. The goal of the repository is to be built out into the home for a multi-disciplinary research network of academics with interest in social games.

Workshop Goals and Questions

“Social Game Studies at CHI 2011” is a one-day workshop organized by members of the *Social Game Studies* community. The workshop will bring together academics from across the CHI community in order to discuss the important questions the emergence of the genre of Social Games creates for CHI research.

Building on the results of the first “Social Game Studies” workshop at the *Games Convention Online*, the workshop at CHI will identify the key opportunities, challenges and questions that remain to be answered – and the specific angle of CHI research on the topic. The workshop will involve presentations and semi-structured discussion. The central goals of the workshop are to identify the “big questions” of social games most relevant to the widest range of academics,

aspects of social games that are of interest and value to be explored from an interdisciplinary perspective, and to see where CHI research can feed into these questions and in turn profit from their study. Leading questions are:

- To which core and current issues in CHI does the study of social games contribute?
- Which methodologies and theoretical approaches from CHI are promising for the study of social games?
- What are the most relevant broad interdisciplinary research questions on social games best suited to integrate the assets and interests of CHI?

Results from the workshop will be collated into a report available from socialgamestudies.org, and participants will be invited to join the community, including publishing slides and position papers on the site. These contributions will help build a central academic resource for future study in this nascent field.

Conclusions

Social network games have emerged as one of the most exciting new entertainment media in recent years. These games appeal to hundreds of millions of players, many of who have had little to no experience with “traditional” genres of video and computer games. Their tight integration with online social networks allows these games to be intertwined with existing real-world social ties, and therefore potentially create genuine social play experiences.

The study of social games is of interest to academics across the disciplines within CHI: It is key to

understanding the motivations and usage patterns of new social technologies by users, especially of those who have low technical knowledge and experience with computer systems. And it taps into a wealth of broader research issues: the negotiation of identities, communities and social contexts in online spaces; design patterns, principles and heuristics for hedonic and sociable user experiences; the dynamics of social ties and informational diffusion in social networks; or the implementation of micropayment and micro-transaction models in e-commerce.

This workshop will form an important milestone to prove the academic value of study within this exciting and fast-moving field. By bringing together the expertise of the CHI community around the topic, we will be able to highlight the most important research questions and research opportunities that are raised by social games as an emerging form of computer-mediated social interaction. The implications of this research will be key to understanding and replicating the success of social games in the design of the computer systems of the future.

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