

“After All the Time I Put Into This”: Co-Creation and the End-of-life of Social Network Games

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ABSTRACT

User engagement in processes of co-design and co-creation are common practices in Social Network Games (SNGs). Though the interdependency between producer and user is of mutual benefit throughout much of the lifetime of an SNG, there are critical moments where this relationship becomes problematic. We adopt an ethnographic approach, covering the entire three year lifespan of a well-known SNG, with a focus on the ‘end of life’ experience from players’ perspectives. Our results show that, at the game’s discontinuation announcement, players reflect strongly on the value that they associate with their gameplay and its involvement. We suggest that the notion of players as co-creators may be undervalued by companies during strategic decision-making especially since at discontinuation players are left without ownership of their co-created product. This deeper understanding of players as co-creators serves as case study for developers building social games both on and off social networking platforms.

Author Keywords

Co-Creation; Social Network Games; Ownership; Ethics.

ACM Classification Keywords

K.8.0 [Personal Computing]: General - Games.

INTRODUCTION

Online social networking sites, such as Facebook, have provided a platform for the delivery of Social Network Games (SNGs) to over 750 million players [18]. SNGs typically follow a free-to-play (F2P) business model [12] in which games are made available as services [34], rather

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than as a self-contained digital copy. Despite the initial business success of the genre and the expectation of market growth [5], there are many recent examples of the discontinuation of SNG titles. For instance, the major SNG publisher Zynga¹ recently announced the withdrawal of six games, leaving players without future access to these games [32]. As the genre matures, and further game discontinuation follows, questions are emerging around the relationship between players and main producers. In particular, since many SNGs empower players as ‘producers’ [4] - in that they are expected to engage in co-creative practice increasing its value through creative participation - , studying the genre offers up important opportunities to develop a deeper understanding of shared ownership generated through play [13].

In this paper, we explore the co-creative process through a case study of the Facebook SNG, *Restaurant City*² - launched by Playfish³ in 2009. We present the results of a longitudinal virtual ethnographic study [15, 22] covering the entire three year lifespan of the SNG, focusing on player reactions to the ultimate discontinuation of the game as a critical moment. Our results reveal implications for players when tension emerges during the co-creation process and game withdrawal phase, between parties. We contribute to a better understanding of player perspectives on co-creation by discussing the implications of our findings for future implementation of co-creative practice in SNGs, providing a wider perspective on ethical challenges associated with sense of ownership and asymmetrical power relationships in digital environments - an issue of importance given the growing number of games offered as transient services rather than as persistent artifacts.

BACKGROUND

Co-creation

Co-creation is defined as the joint effort of companies and customers to create product value and personalized experiences through a continuous, real-time, and direct

¹ Zynga’s official website: <https://zynga.com/>

² Restaurant City is no longer available online

³ Playfish’ official website doesn’t exist anymore

dialogue [29]. It is concerned with “a non-trivial component of the design”, and includes “the direct involvement of consumers or users” [3]. Literature from marketing and management, on one hand, highlights the value added to products and business, including greater knowledge and adaptation to user needs, as well as increased sales potential, customer satisfaction, and loyalty [6, 26]. Often, the co-creative paradigm implies a balanced, mutual collaboration and reciprocity between consumer and producer [29, 37]. However, this perspective is receiving critical attention, as it requires “strategic institutionalization of control over consumers” by organizations [8, 14]. On the other hand, cultural studies researchers see co-creation as a new bottom-up production model [3], in which user behaviour is guided by intrinsic motivations for participation as “symbolic production (image-making, information distribution) embedded within new models of consumption” [7]. Finally, other research [3, 16] has highlighted the need to see both views (corporate and cultural) as co-evolving processes that converge; sometimes reinforcing each other, but sometimes in conflict [16].

Gaming and Co-creation

In the games industry it is common practice for players to engage in participatory design processes. In addition to the production of tangible “artifacts” or game content [20, 27], players can also be responsible for generating core cultural value [36] and curating social experiences both inside and outside the game [24]. However, players’ involvement in co-creation has been identified as a double-edged sword, which can be both constructive and/or destructive [9, 28]. Put shortly, developers must establish a delicate balance between player involvement and control over the game property [16].

SNGs are specifically created to be played online on social network sites such as Facebook [33], so players need to be online to gain access, rather than downloading a digital copy of the game. Their F2P nature means that players can avoid an initial purchase price or monthly subscription fees; instead producers base the revenue system mostly on the sale of virtual currency, to buy virtual items or faster in game progression [23]. Development of SNGs is commonly driven by data obtained directly from users as core insight: developers obtain real-time insights into players’ needs by observing in-game behaviour [19], and by providing digital spaces to amplify consumers’ voices through opportunities for continuous user feedback (e.g., forums, Twitter accounts, Facebook fan pages, etc.) [10, 17].

CASE STUDY: CO-CREATION IN RESTAURANT CITY

In this case study, we aim to address two main research questions. (1) What co-creative practices can be observed in SNGs, and what are players’ roles in this process? (2) What are the reactions of co-creative players when games are discontinued? These questions aim to explore the nature of player involvement in co-creation, focused on a critical moment in the game's lifespan, to facilitate a better

understanding of challenges around ownership in the context of discontinuation of SNGs.

Game: Restaurant City

RC was originally launched by Playfish in 2009, and became one of the most successful SNGs launched by the developer, amassing 18 million monthly active users at its peak in late 2009 and 2010 [1]. Playfish was acquired by Electronic Arts (EA)⁴, who subsequently decided to withdraw the game in June 2012. RC gameplay was focused on the efficient running of a restaurant located on a street co-constructed by Facebook friends who also played the game. Progression was made by obtaining ingredients to improve dishes on offer in the restaurant. Ingredients could be gained in three ways: (1) social interaction (exchanging, gifting, and helping peers), (2) incremental approaches requiring a substantial time commitment, and (3) purchase using in-game currency. Another key aspect of the game was the customization of restaurants, particularly by regularly updating themed furniture and décor, also available for purchase. Players were encouraged to develop short-term goals (e.g., obtaining a special edition items), mid-term objectives (e.g., hiring more staff), and long term goals (e.g. becoming part of Gourmet Street, RC’s leaderboard).

Data Collection

Our study followed a process of virtual ethnography [15, 22], with focus on the players' experiences rather than obtaining primary data from producers. Data collection took place over the course of three years and was organized across several stages. As researchers, we immersed ourselves in the game for a period of one and half years. Afterwards, we collected data through direct observation, participation as well as an online focus group which took place over the course of two weeks, to gain insights into player motivations, interaction practices and impacts on everyday life. When RC withdrawal was announced, we had the opportunity to study player perspectives on this process by conducting short interviews, and collecting data from digital platforms outside the game. Player engagement around RC was evident through a range of platforms including the official fan page on Facebook which had about 8,430,000 fans in 2012 (from whom we analyzed 5,692 posts), the Playfish/EA forum which had about 1,233,000 users in 2012 (from whom 2,661 posts were analyzed), and user-created fan pages and other user-created content, e.g. [30, 35, 38]. The official sites facilitated communication between community managers (developer’s staff) and players.

Data Analysis

Data were handled using EdEt (Editor for Ethnographers), and we applied Qualitative Content Analysis [25]. Thematic categorization was based on a hybrid strategy. We developed a preliminary codebook based on our research

⁴ Electronic Arts’ official website: <http://www.ea.com/>

questions as a means of organizing the text in temporary categories for subsequent interpretation. Initial categorization was informed by a theoretical understanding of virtual communities [21, 22] included themes of creation and loss of a social identity, roles, ties and cultures of participation. We then conducted an in-depth analysis through an inductive codification process. Our data were organized and reduced to the main categories and interrelationships between them [11]. In this paper, we focus on themes related to the player as a co-creator and tensions emerged between co-creators when strategic decisions were made, although data was gathered as part of a larger ongoing project.

RESULTS

In this section, we present themes that emerged around the player as a co-creator and player responses to RC's discontinuation.

Player Roles

Three main roles associated with co-creation during the engagement phase emerged from our data: players as community, players as game designers, and players as quality assurance.

Players as community. Gameplay was recognized, by players in the focus group, to be oriented by a cooperative premise reinforcing social cohesion between neighbours "[...] while you help colleagues, they also help you. If you carry on like this, the group is maintained, and you establish ties [...]" and field notes "Our personal relationship was enriched by social interaction [through] this game". In the forum, some players were officially recognized by the company for contributing to the RC community as a whole, for instance through a "Welcome Committee" programme (to develop a warm atmosphere in the forum and to welcome newbies) or through a moderator programme (e.g., responding to discussions, and ensuring forum rules were followed). Thus, Playfish/EA fostered and maintained a thriving and highly social community centered around, but not always focused on, RC.

Players as game designers. The company frequently used the forum to ask for feedback and suggestions from players in relation to the game. These issues were taken into consideration as the game design developed, and were reflected upon by players who noticed how the design improved over time ("At that time (a year ago) there were not many interaction opportunities with others [...] the only goal was to level up and earn ratings of people visiting your restaurant; ie, long-term goals"). The company also responded to specific design issues as they arose. In these ways, the player community was clearly recognised as a valuable resource in the continuing development and refinement of the game itself.

Players as quality assurance. Engaged forum users frequently reinforced their passion for fair play by warning moderators about issues with the game. They also actively

policed the forum space by creating threads to identify (to the community and Moderators) user profiles manifesting suspicious behaviour (such as over-activity when new to the forum). Moreover, player co-creators, when in the third year identified that RC was starting to face difficulties retaining users, made an effort to help the company, identifying the most possible reasons for the decline – such as an increasingly difficult playability (as time limits or unavailability of required ingredients), the lack of expansions, technical issues (glitches, bugs or connection issues) or players' sense of being ignored.

Player Responses to the Discontinuation of RC

Player responded quickly and emotionally to every strategic decision made by the company, including monetization and withdrawal.

Response to monetization. Players exhibited a strong reaction to EA's attempts to improve monetisation from the title. First, by noting the gameplay without investment in real currency had become extremely difficult "[...] it's becoming hard to level-up [...] I never earn enough money to build my new restaurant Layout, because I need all money earned at the end of the day to put restaurant personnel to work. If I want to run the restaurant faster I should pay [...]" and later by accusing the company of neglecting player concerns in favour of commercial ones. Users accused EA of damaging the game design by turning it into a "pay-to-win" title.

Emotional reaction to closure. In April 2012, EA announced the imminent and permanent closure of RC. Two months later, the fan page post had gained 8,200 comments, 3,666 likes and the news was shared 3,113 times. The player-base had a strong emotional reaction to the news – "A BIG FU to EA and their F'n game", "you've got to be kidding. after all the time i put into this game" and "i am seriously devastated". A common theme among the reactions was a sense of betrayal. Users felt invested in both the game and the community and the closure was seen as an act of treachery: "this attitude grates on me, who did they think they were??", "[...] ur not disappointing us fans, ur KILLING US!" and "What a rip off. Bad planning on their part should not mean that the people who play should get punished."

Ownership. Players were alarmed that the game could be unilaterally removed from them and felt deserving of better treatment: "HOW ABOUT ALL MY DATA? AND THE TIME I'VE SPENT DECORATING MY RESTAURANT AND UPGRADING MY MENU??" and "I do not want all my work taken from me." And players frequently talked about the effort they expended "This is a tragedy. I am most upset I will loose my restaurant that I have been building for years...". Players compared their market situation with other genres "I was thinking, why I like console games so much: you get them and own them and don't really have to expand on them. [...] investments are lost and the game can stop working, be useless, cash flushed. Not in a console."

Negotiation. EA offered to migrate players' virtual currency to another EA game (The Sims Social⁵) and virtual cash as reward. After player complaints (e.g. *"why force us play Sims??? Dis game sucks!"*) the community pressured for their virtual currency to be transferrable to *Pet Society* (another Playfish' game⁶) *"I don't want to play SIMS. I either want to change them to PET SOCIETY cash [...]"*, and finally got it. However, after that, the community attempted to offer suggestions for how to manage the end-of-life of RC: *"Maybe you guys can update it 4 weeks once, but not to close it?"*, *"Can't they leave it up to play without updates???"*, trying to get a hard copy *"Is there any chance of restaurant city coming out on PlayStation, Wii & Xbox ?"*, but EA never responded again.

DISCUSSION

Although our study only focused on a single game title, it provides transferable insight into co-creative practice in SNGs. Our results show that players assume a range of roles around the game increasing the value for the producer of the game (e.g. quality assurance), and that this engagement leads to emotional investment on behalf of players (as witnessed during the withdrawal phase of RC), suggesting that co-creative practice also improves player experience. In this section, we critically reflect upon co-creative practice in SNGs. We provide a wider perspective on the ethical challenges associated with co-creation, with a focus on new forms of ownership and the asymmetrical power relationship, reinforced at the withdrawal of SNGs.

Perspectives on Co-creation in SNGs

To understand co-creative practice in SNGs, it is important to consider perspectives of SNG producers and players. Our results suggest that users' engagement as co-creators is led by a desire for self-realization through interaction (e.g. elaborating their own creations or acquiring social roles), and the benefit of the group (e.g. assuring game quality or community safety) as main motivators, suggesting that value for players emerges from socio-cultural motives [3, 5]. In contrast, a well-documented motivator for developers to engage in co-creative practice is increased economic return [e.g. 6, 29]. Previous research on co-creative practice has discussed the impact of co-creation as a source of conflict [9, 31]. We argue that co-creative practice in SNGs leads to considerable challenges since power relationships remain deeply asymmetrical, i.e. SNG producers retain ultimate control over their product, including its withdrawal.

Negotiating Ethics of Co-creation in SNGs

Inviting players to engage in co-creation of SNGs introduces ethical challenges for the game development community: games provided as a service, such as SNGs, will inevitably reach a point where the game is no longer

economically viable, challenging the relationship between players and producers.

We observed that players showed a strong sense of agency along with investment in SNGs. This is an interesting opportunity for developers – using players as designers, community managers and as unpaid quality assurance staff adds value to the game with minimal cost. However, as a consequence of horizontal treatment, game's co-creative players also expected participation in strategic decisions. This leads to conflict when decisions were made unilaterally, and user attempts to negotiate control were ignored, turning a positive and carefully nurtured relationship into an openly asymmetrical power relation. Moreover, players didn't seem to be aware of this asymmetrical relationship, at least until it was too late, becoming powerless in regards of the fate of their creations, which caused players emotional distress as well as to vent their frustrations by openly demonizing the producer brand.

Even though the players entered into the co-creation process willingly, they were ultimately aggrieved that (1) their data and creations became appropriated by the producer, (2) they were excluded from accessing what they perceived as 'property' and (3) they were denied what they believed was appropriate compensation. We join other researchers in calling for a more responsive behaviour when dealing with 'producers' [2] and warn of the possible destruction of the value once created by them [28]. Though there are clear practical difficulties in granting permanent access to co-created content, one option is for producers to more carefully consider compensation mechanisms in the disengagement phase as a matter of strategic planning and carefully considering levels of user governance [36] in early stages of the co-creative relationship.

CONCLUSION

This paper contributes towards a better understanding of the social and ethical implications of engaging players as co-creators - an important challenge in the games industry as more products move to service-based models. Games developed as services, and especially SNGs, are often transient and it is inevitable for games to reach a "natural end". It is not our intent to argue against this, however, we instead remind developers of the implications of engaging players as co-creators in their work, especially when depriving players of both the means of production and the fruits of their efforts.

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⁵ The Sims Social is no longer available online

⁶ Pet Society is no longer available online

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