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Research Article

EXPERIENCING REALITY: GAMIFICATION CULTURE IN SOCIAL MEDIA

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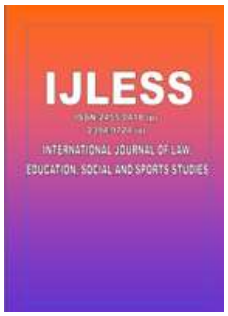

ABSTRACT
Social Network Games (SNGs) have become extremely popular than Social Network Sites (SNS) over the past few years and it has created a whole new subculture. One of the basic questions that faced by these SNGs can be, 'are SNGs really social'? After having many surveys, the conclusion is that people prefer to play social network games because it is like a pathway to create a common ground for the future digital interaction rather than a direct social interaction. SNGs in Facebook are played by millions of people. A common set of features: presence, communication and interaction can find in social games. One can also say that these features are primarily focused on gaining attention from the people and also to make them hold on to the games. This article focused on how people experience from playing Facebook games and how SNGs provide new spaces for purposive leisure to maintain relationships, which shape the social interactions in specific ways. Customization is strongly associated with social interactions, especially when it is possible to use new avatar than the use of space.
Keywords: Social network sites, social network games, participatory culture, magic circle, casual games.

Introduction

What makes social network sites unique is not that they allow individuals to meet strangers, but rather they enable users to articulate and make visible their social networks. -Boyd and Ellison.

Social media is increasingly infiltrating everyday media practices. As we witness the rise of smartphones that allow users to move ambiently between social media like Facebook, Instagram and Twitter etc., at all times of day. As a series of cultural practices and artefacts that are both commercial and cultural, Social Network Sites (SNSs), are becoming an integral part of identity, social and political management. SNSs have become the interface between people and social media. These sites represent some of the most well known and most highly valued brands on the internet today. For many the 'internet' is synonymous with SNSs. Names such as Facebook, Instagram, Twitter, LinkedIn, Habbo and Renren, which boasts millions of online users to use these services to build connections with other people, to stay in touch, to find support and answers to questions, to reinforce common ideas and values, to share news and other information and to be entertained.

The paper tries to develop an understanding of Social Network Sites, that goes beyond the popular and stereotyped notion of SNSs being an Anglophonic domain, populated under the age of

25s, who are engaged in leisure conversations about what they have planned to do on the weekend. Instead, the paper trying to present SNSs as a global phenomenon that is engaging people from broad demographics in a variety of ways. Most importantly, the paper is interested in the ways that SNSs provide places for the construction and maintenance of relationship between people. As SNSs evolve, the term 'social media' is also developing to encompass the growing and often unwieldy sphere of contemporary online media practice. For Melissa Gregg, social media accompanies a movement towards 'presence bleed', 'where boundaries between personal and professional identities no longer apply'. Underlying this concept is an array of questions about the changing nature of what is public and what is private, and where work ends and life begins, as social media intrudes everyday life.

Social media influences the way in which we think, experience and practice 'online media'. It is no longer merely a form of teen socializing- it has become an integral part of everyday life. In turn, this influences how we reflect and engage with friends, family, colleagues and politics. Social media further amplifies the changes in the media landscape and as it does, it provides new avenues for dissemination and engagement. As Jenkins mentioned, social media is part of the rise of 'participatory culture' which empowers users to produce their own content, to become 'producers'.

In attempting to define social network sites, it is useful to note Boyd and Ellison's comment that the terms 'network' and 'networking', which are often used interchangeably in critical literature. They prefer to use the term 'network' because, according to them 'networking' implies the initiation of relationships by strangers. So, they elect the term 'social networking site' to emphasize their role in maintenance of relationships that in many cases exist in offline as well as online contexts. At the core of social network sites, is the construction of social networks that are enabled and enhanced by the internet and their definition is the most accurate one for SNS. SNS are:

Web-based services that allow individuals to (1) construct public or semi-public profile within a bounded system, (2) articulate a list of other users with whom they share a connection, and (3) view and traverse their list of connections and those made by others within the system.

Many social network sites share a number of common features such as profiles, list of connections, comments and private messaging. Profiles are how users identify themselves to the social media site and usually contain a range of information about the user, including a name, email address, birth date and other biographical information. Many sites also encourage users to upload a photo to use in their profiles. This information helps to build social networks and allows for site features like, birthdays reminders, get-togethers, functions etc., but also it ensures users' privacy. Some sites make their users' profiles publicly available, while others keep profiles hidden, only revealing them to other users of the SNS based on their relationship with the profile's owner.

As the number of people using the internet began to multiply in the mid-1990s, internet researchers began to discuss and emphasize the continuity of offline relationships and the behaviors of users over discontinuity, strengthening the importance of social context. One of the key findings was that people's communication depends more on how strong their offline ties were like, people who were already friends or who had developed relationships with each other through work. The online experiences were grounded in real world settings which led to the recognition of an 'ethnographic shift' in internet studies. Unlike earlier studies of online communities, which typically started by constructing the online environment as a novel communicative space. Miller and Salter saw geographical place and the offline social world of their users as an extremely important consideration in their attempts to understand the usage of the internet. They described their approach as 'one that sees it (the internet) embedded in a specific place, which also transforms'.

A key facet of these new internet community studies was the recognitions of the internet not as one monolithic or homogeneous communication technology. Instead, the internet is presented as an unbounded object, which escapes a single all- encompassing definition. Unlike a mass media subject

such as television, the internet is not understood as something that represents a totality. From this perspective, the internet is defined by an ongoing process of meaning making, a process through which the internet is socially constructed through its use. With the rise of the SNSs, questions about the nature of online community have become a topic of interest. Danah Boyd has reworked the idea of networked communities within the SNS to show networked 'publics' as an extension to the word 'communities'. There are two fundamental components outlined here that are worth reiterating: networked publics which are both spaces and groups of people who are connected through practice and technology. They are 'simultaneously a space and a collection of people' (Boyd, 2011). Importantly, Boyd argues that these publics are not just networked because they are linked together by the technology, but they are transformed and restructured by networked media.

In many ways, SNSs are the definitive social media technology. They are the other face which engage social media and make people to engage with the space of internet. Questions persist about whether SNSs and online interactions are better understood as a network or a community and the answer is that the evolution of the internet as a medium for sociality made SNSs exhibit properties of both. They are also both global and local. They are the powerful symbol where the communication technologies really are spanning the globe, cross cultures and encouraging research that appropriates the diversity it represents. SNSs have not become popular because they create social networks, but because they provide a space for social network to exist. These social networks, exit both online and offline worlds. They provide spaces for online relations, but also structure our offline relationships.

Social media games are games that are played within social network sites (SNSs). These names like *Candy Crush Saga*, *FarmVille* and *Word Wrangler* are familiar and integral part of using SNSs more specifically for Facebook users. They are both the source of entertainment and a way to maintain relationship with friends and family. Thus, for people who study social media, social media games become an important part of the overall experience of social media and demand attention. For game-studies scholars, the emergence of social media games is very significant. Social media games are being played by people with different motivations and different demographics than those who play games on consoles or those who play conventional computer games and they are presenting a new economics for game production, which has seen new players to enter the market. As Juul mentioned, the emergence of social media games constitutes a 'gamification' of culture, which can be seen as a casual revolution.

In the past, computer games have stereotypically been portrayed by the media in western cultures as solitary activities for children who are socially inept and/or physically moribund. However, the growth of the computer game industry in recent years has made these ideas about games difficult to maintain. Despite having received a reputation as a solidarity and socially isolating pursuit, games have in fact been associated with friendliness. The games like chess, poker, bridge, mahjong, monopoly etc. require two or more players and the games like solitaire or patience are played solo are the exception rather than the rule. While many computer games are designed for a single player experience, even here there is a great deal of social activity that extends from the game but may not be immediately apparent to say nothing of the many games which played as multiplayer games in an online environment (Taylor).

Beyond the games themselves, gaming has been a source of sociality as players build forums to discuss games and develop user created content that ranges from fan fiction to games 'mods' that see players become creators and actively hack back games in order to customize them. Far from being an isolating or solitary experience, game-playing is often a highly social experience, especially when games move into online multiplayer environments. If games can be social, then it might also be fair to say that games are frequently found alongside social activities, and in this respect SNSs are certainly

no exception. SNS based games are extremely popular and have played an important role in building the subscription bases of social media as players seek friends to play with.

In the literature on games, the idea that games are separate to other parts of life was explored as far back as 1938 by Johann Huizinga, who examined games in his book *Homo Ludens*. Huizinga was fascinated by the game and wanted to understand its function in culture. One of the concepts described by Huizinga in his book was the idea of the 'magic circle', a concept that was picked up and popularized by Katie Salen and Eric Zimmerman in their 2003 book *Rules of Play*. For Huizinga, Salen and Zimmerman, the magic circle acted as a site for play that was separate and removed from the real world. Inside the magic circle was the game world which was associated with play rather than reality. Thus, inside the game world you are completely free to play, to try things out and to fail without fear of there being any real-world repercussions. There is no sense that the barrier between the game world and the real world is at all permeable.

Casual games, as the name suggests are games that can be enjoyable played without the high-level attention that is associated with non-casual games. These are games that do not require the same investment of time and so appeal to a broader market than traditional console or PC-based games. The games are typically said to be easy to learn. However, as Juul points out, these stereotypical definitions of casual games often do not withstand close scrutiny. The most distinctive feature of casual games is their lite attention mode of engagement or their 'interruptibility' as Juul terms it. Second, this low attention mode of play means that casual games are well suited to environments in which the user is likely to be engaged in one or more task. Casual games also provide different incentives for play. They present players with easier challenges and reward players for succeeding, some excessively. This different dynamic makes casual games easier for a more casual games to engage with and makes them less likely to leave the game out of frustration. It is also to be noted that while the rewards are handed out frequently in casual games, they do punish users for failure, but that 'you rarely fail due to a single mistake but rather an accumulation of mistakes' (Juul). This maintains a pressure on the player to succeed, but reduces the penalty for failure. The key point here is that casual games are more forgiving than traditional games.

If the enabling development for mobile casual games was the smartphone and the associated app stores, then the equivalent for web-based casual game developers has been the SNSs. It is here, at the intersection between casual games and social media, that we see the emergence of the social media game. SNSs like Facebook and MySpace provide a platform for game developers that offers added benefits for the developer, in much the same way that app stores and operating systems offers benefits for mobile game developers.

The importance of playfulness in social media is also echoed by Kirman, who emphasizes the importance of what he calls 'gaps' in game design. There are the places in which there is space for players to deviate from the game's overall design. These gaps allow players to experiment playfully with the game and to come up with new and unintended ways of playing games. This can range from players of a game like FarmVille creating designs and illustrations by planting their crops in strategic positions, to players subverting the intended success or winning conditions of the game. In essence, the more latitude the players have to experiment within the game, the more playful the game and the more potential it has to become successful.

Jinghui Hou, in her study of social media games, found that players do not seem to be motivated by challenge and competition to the same degree that players of conventional ages are, but instead play social media games for relaxation and diversion. This reflects the casual nature of social media games. Specifically, they do not require extreme expenditure of time or attention and do not punish failure and also the social dimension of social media games was important for players. According to Hou, 'respondents played social games more frequently, spent more time on the game and got more engaged

in game activities for the purpose of social interaction'. The social interaction was the most significant reason for playing social media games. But the respondents nominated relaxation and enjoyment as their primary motivation.

One of the key issues here is that players are not one homogenous group, but are diverse and different people play different games in different ways. Not all players of social media games approach them with the same attitude and some media games promote different kinds of game play than others. Some players do invest serious amount of time and resources in social media games and could be termed hardcore players, even though they play casual games.

If we consider that different players may play social media games differently, then it is just as important to consider how different kinds of social media games can be affect player sociality. Rossi suggests that social media games can be grouped into two broad categories: (1) 'skill/ knowledge' games, which is essentially challenge the player to accomplish a given task or answer a question. (2) The 'managerial or truly social' games, in which the object of the game is not to win so much as to build and develop virtual space populated with virtual goods. This then leads to the idea that there can be at least two kinds of friends in the SNSs gamer's network: real friends (people who they socialize with) and instrumental friends, who are on the user's friends list within the SNS, but who might otherwise have only a very weak relationship with that user. This raises an important point about sociality within the social media games. The game can act as a kind of catalyst for other social behaviors and may spawn further kinds of sociality and creative production from players.

Case Study

To show how the qualitative insight into social media games are being used around the game space or magic circle, a substantiate case study of *FarmVille* is going to analyze. This serves two purposes: first, it highlights how some of the conceptual ideas about social media games work in practice and second, it demonstrates that social media games are not just Anglophonic phenomenon and are not just used by the young. *FarmVille* incorporates the social networking aspect of Facebook into many areas of gameplay. Contacting other players allows the player to improve their farm more quickly by using their help as farmhands or by gaining rewards from helping them. Frequently the aid from the other players is a substitute for Farm Cash and by doing this player get an effective choice between spamming their friends with messages and requests or by paying real-world cash. Recently *FarmVille* has allowed players to add neighbours that are not Facebook friends, thus allowing the player to have many neighbours at hand. Players invite friends or other players that are not Facebook friends to be their neighbours, allowing them to perform five actions on each other's farms per day by "visiting" it. Neighbours may also send gifts and supplies to each other and complete specialized tasks together for rewards, and also help in joint efforts to grow a certain number of certain crops. Gifts are sent as mystery gifts which are exclusive, but random items and also special deliveries with building supplies or by choosing a particular item. There is no cost for sending.

The secret of *Farmville's* popularity was not its gameplay or its aesthetics. It is popular because it entangles users in web of social requirements. When users log into Facebook, they are reminded that their neighbours have sent them gifts, posted bonuses on their walls and helped with each other's' farm. In turn, they are obligated to return the courtesies. In the words of French sociologist Marcel Mauss, "gifts are never free, they bind the giver and the receiver in a loop of reciprocity". It is impolite to refuse a gift and ruder if you did not return the kindness of your giver. One play *Farmville* because it is a nice way to show how good you are to one another and also to show the politeness.

Conclusion

Games are social activities and it is no accident that some of the earliest as well as some of the most current form of online sociality takes place within the framework of games. As we have seen,

social games- as games that are played within the constructs of SNSs- have attracted great numbers of players, brought new subscribers to SNSs and have opened up both gaming and social media platform. Social games are social because of the fundamental role that social rendezvous plays in them. All social games, in some way or another utilize people's friends or the potential for people to make new connections in the online environment. This is not to say that all social media games are the same or that all players interact with these games in the same way. While some users play social media games competitively with their friends, others have a tendency to stick on virtual gardens for hours a week and thus accumulated from many small moments snatched throughout the day. The uses of social media games are almost as varied as the people who use them, but as we saw in the case study, there are familiar motivations even across language and cultural boundaries. Social media games are playing a central role in the ways that people socialize within SNSs.

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Video Games

Candy Crush Saga (King/2012)

Farmville (Zinga/2009)

Word Wrangler (Brainzai/ 2014)