Facebook Games: The Point Where Tribes And Casual Games Meet

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ABSTRACT

The focus on social games in recent years has been generated by the rising number of users of MMORPGs (Massive Multiplayers Role Playing Games) such as World of Warcraft (WoW). However, the rise of social games in social networks has also played an interesting part in social games awareness. In this paper we focus on 'social' casual games in Facebook. Our assumption is that the success of games in the Facebook context is linked to the blending of personal and social aspects. In particular: (i) the engagement in 'fictional' social actions, (ii) the use of asynchronous actions, (iii) the combination of public and private actions within the game. The three above-mentioned aspects contribute to the emergence of particular social groupings, very similar to Cova's tribes.
In order to demonstrate the previous assertions the paper will first define a set of basic concepts and will then describe some practical examples from the Facebook context.

KEYWORDS

Social games, casual games, tribes, Facebook.

1. INTRODUCTION

2009 was the year social games exploded into the mainstream consciousness. While most of the focus on social games was due to MMORPGs (Massive Multiplayers Role Playing Games) such as World of Warcraft (WoW), a large part of social games awareness was generated by the rise of social games in social networks. Although many social networks (such as MySpace and Bebo) have contributed to the growth of this trend by featuring a growing range of applications, Facebook is the social network where games applications have had the hugest impact. For example, *Farmville* –a land management game- has 76,677,249 active monthly users, *Mafia Wars* –a kind of role-playing game- 24,650,755 active monthly users.
Even though Facebook contains a huge amount of 'recreational' applications, in this paper we are interested only in those that can be defined as 'social casual games' (see Section 3).

As in all real life games, the success of online games is dependent on their playfulness i.e., all the elements of the (digital) design that engage people's attention or involve them in an activity for recreation, amusement, or creative enjoyment (Follett, 2007).

This paper will show that in the Facebook context playfulness is linked to blending of personal aspects and social aspects. In particular, playability is constructed through: (i) the engagement in 'fictional' social actions, (ii) the use of asynchronous actions, (iii) the combination of public and private actions within the game. The three above-mentioned aspects contribute to the emergence of particular social groupings, very

similar to Cova's tribes (see Cova et al., 2002). Consequently, the social ties created through the game encourage the user to return to use the application.

In order to demonstrate the previous assertions the paper will first define a set of basic concepts to help us understand this trend. The concept of playfulness, the concepts of casual and social games, and the concept of tribe will be defined. These definitions will be used to demonstrate why exactly the above-mentioned elements determine the success of games in the social network. Finally, some practical examples from the Facebook context will be described.

2. THE CONCEPT OF PLAYFULNESS

While in the introduction to this paper we defined playfulness as simply 'all the elements of a (digital) design that engage people's attention or involve them in an activity for recreation, amusement, or creative enjoyment', the definition of playfulness is actually more complicated. For example, it is important to understand that playfulness is different from 'flow' or 'fun'. In fact, the concept of playfulness does not imply absorption (as for the flow concept), skills, challenges, or even attention. In the same way, playfulness is a mood that lasts much longer than emotions, such as, for instance, 'fun' (Parker-Rees, 1999).

In a way, playfulness can be seen as an inclination to play. Meire (2007) identifies this inclination as a preliminary to play that prepares the conditions for the arising of play opportunities and play actions. In addition, the author distinguishes between playful state of mind and actual play activity. Equally interesting, Barnett (1991) defines playfulness as a mixture of 'cognitive spontaneity, social spontaneity, physical spontaneity, manifest joy, and sense of humor'. The interesting aspect of this definition is that it addresses both personal and social aspects. This means that both of them are fundamental elements in the creation of requirements for playfulness.

Interestingly enough, Facebook 'recreational applications' also seem to appeal to the sphere of emotions (fun and playful mood) rather than actions (Rao, 2008). In fact, most Facebook games have a very simple gameplay. For example, the above-mentioned *Mafia Wars* simply asks the player to push a button in order to go on missions and so acquire experience. While the detailed gameplay for this application is more structured, it's a matter of fact that it is very far from the complex gameplay of Word of Warcraft. On the other hand the millions of users playing *Mafia Wars* each month are an indicator that there is something apart from the gameplay that encourages its users to play these games.

3. CASUAL GAMING AND SOCIAL GAMING

Most of the games developed for Facebook draw on 'browser games'. However, because of the environment they are developed in (Facebook) they voluntarily (or involuntarily) include the social aspect.

On December 4 2009, 208 applications were listed as the 'most popular games' on the Facebook site. Between these 208 applications, 100 (44%) can be defined as 'social' casual games (in the sense we will explain hereafter) while the other 116 can be classified simply as casual games. As examples of the latter we can cite *Hatchlings* and *Chain Rxn*. We have defined these applications as 'casual games' because of the practically non-existent social aspect (as in the Solitaire application). As a consequence, in Facebook the number of active monthly users of these rarely exceeds 600,000. Actually, there is still much confusion regarding the status of most Facebook applications. Marketed as games of some kind until recently, at the beginning of 2008 Facebook managers introduced the new category 'Just for Fun' to accommodate those applications that didn't fit into the 'Gaming' category. In fact, the ambiguity both categories present is often resolved by indexing the same applications in different categories at the same time. For this reason it is not surprising at all to find very different kinds of applications in the most popular games category[1]. While all the

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[1] While the analysis for this paper was done before the Facebook interface change in the first week of February, the new classification did not change the above-mentioned observations. In fact, while games are

applications listed in Facebook as 'the most used' have been analyzed, in this paper the assumptions made in the introduction will only be demonstrated for what we have defined as 'social' casual games, i.e., games applications that show at least one social feature which is an integral part of the gameplay.

After this introduction it is important to define what we mean in this paper when talking about 'social' casual games.

3.1 What a casual game is

Casual games are one of the most popular categories of games played over the Internet (IGDA, 2006).

There are various definitions for the term casual game available from different organizations (e.g. IGDA, CGA, GDC) or spokespersons for the industry (i.e. Tams 2006, Wallace 2006, Waugh 2006. For a more in depth discussion of the topic, see Kuittinen, 2007).

According to the Casual Games Association 2007 Market Report, 'Casual games are video games develo ped for the mass consumer, even those who would not normally regard themselves as a 'gamer.'   (IGDA, 2009). This definition is also true for Facebook users (Rao, 2008). In fact, following Rao's analysis Facebook users seem to share the same denial as casual games players, who do not see themselves as gamers.

In general, casual games involve less complicated game controls and less complexity in terms of gameplay than others online games, which make them very popular and accessible. They can be seen as games that are easy to play and their main focus is on entertainment and relaxation.

While there is the perception that casual game players do not play games frequently or only play in very short game sessions, there is a large group of users who do not fit this stereotype. Many of the casual online games sites are some of the stickiest web sites on the Internet. For example, on the AOL Games Channel the majority of its online classic card, board and free casino games average between 20-40 minutes per game session. For example, even Solitaire averages 40 minutes a game session, even though a round can be completed in two minutes (see IGDA, 2009). While these times differ greatly from the MMORPGs ones (on average, each character spends about 10 hours in WoW during that 1-week period- see Ducheneaut et al., 2006) surely they are remarkable for a so-called 'casual' game. If we compare these data with the above-mentioned assertion that casual games do not see themselves as players, an interesting scenario emerges.

3.2 What a social game is

People are inherently social creatures and, for this reason, people are constantly searching for others to share their interests, to solve their problems, to date, to meet people, to have an informal conversation, to ask an expert for some help, as well as other interests.

In his paper 'Why game studies now?' Dmitri Williams (2006) says that there are business and technical reasons for the postarcade era resurgence of social game play, but they do not fully explain the sudden boom in online networked gaming that ranges from casual card games to vibrant massively multiplayer online games. While, it has become obvious that the content of games matters, the social side of what happens to the players, their friends, families, and communities' matters as well and matters a great deal at this particular moment. Endorsing Robert Putnam's (2000) ideas Williams claims that the backdrop for the rise of social gaming is the decline in civic and shared spaces and a decline in real-world places to meet and converse with real people. Whether or not we agree with this statement the emergence of a social online era is a matter of fact, also supported by the growing development of ubiquitous computing. In addition, we can note the increasing importance of a sense of community for the online gamers. In fact, the social gaming audience is looking for an experience that either is built on connections, or incorporates some interaction with others who like the same kinds of games. Players want to compete, collaborate, socialize, and connect through chat and other forms of online communication (Gerhard, 2009).

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now divided into Action & Arcade Games, Board Games, Card Games, Role Playing Games, Virtual World Games, and Word Games most of the applications are simply classified as 'games'.

However, it's worth noting that games in Facebook (and in general in all social networks) are a particular kind of social game.

3.2.1 A particular characteristic of social casual games: Asynchronous play

Social media have enabled conversations to occur asynchronously and beyond geographic constraints, but they are still typically bounded by a reasonably well defined group of participants in some sort of shared social context (Boyd et al. 2010).

The same asynchronicity in a particular context can be found in games developed for Facebook . The concept of asynchronous multiplay was first introduced by Bogost (see Bogost, 2007) to designate those situations in which players play a game 'in sequence, rather than simultaneously', and breaks in the game are a way to 'accommodate real life necessities and game expectations'. In general, asynchronous play supports multiple players playing in sequence, not in tandem. In fact we can talk of 'representation' of multiplay rather than actual interaction between different players. Actually, the space for action in most of those games is personal and not shared. For example, in *Farmville* - a farm management simulation game -the only farm the user can interact with is their own. Other players' farms are there only for 'visiting' purposes' and the player cannot modify them. The same thing happens in *Happy Aquarium* , where the user grows and sells fish. Other's interaction spaces (aquaria) are there only to create a sense of 'social presence' (i.e., that someone else is in the same environment at the same time). In the same way, when one user engages in competitive play, the opponent is notified of having being challenged by the first user and of the outcome of the challenge, but in reality the outcome of the challenge isn't affected by either of the players, and the challenged is allowed to respond to the challenge only by initiating a new game, not in the same contest.

Only in rare and particular circumstances do games in Facebook adopt a real collaborative approach. For example in *Mobster2* – another RPG like game – in order to complete one of the quests, several players have to be online at the same time.

In this sense, the presence of friends seems more a symbolic representation with the aim of giving a feeling of community and participation without actual co-presence or interaction.

However, this 'fictional' sense of presence becomes more real because of the environment the game is in.

First of all, the 'fictional' people you are asked to play with are your friends, so people you know (more or less). In addition, most games share the same pattern. For example, when a user 'visits' someone else's farm or aquarium, the action can be 'public'. In fact, the player can publish on his Facebook wall that he/she has helped his friend, or that he needs some object to progress in the game. Even when the application is played only once, the results of the game can be permanently shown in the user's profile, as boxes or as micro-stories in the mini-feeds (minimal chronicles of every action related to the user or her Friends in Facebook), hence contributing through their persistence to the user's identity, as expressed by the profile. Note that the private aspect is also important. For example, if I like, I can decide not to show my friends the last trophy I won or the last object obtained in the game. In this case, refusing to share some information the player carves out a space for the self in a social environment.

To summarize: the 'space of play' in Facebook can be seen as both private and public. The same happens for actions because each of them can be 'announced' or not to friends in the 'public' space of the wall. On the other hand, the time of play is always asynchronous.

4.   TRIBES AND TIES

All the elements described in Section 3 of this paper (the engagement in 'fictional' social actions, the use of asynchronous actions, and the shift between public and private actions within the game) have as a consequence the creation of links between players.

Cova (Cova, 2003) uses the word 'tribe' to refer to the re-emergence of quasi-archaic values: a local sense of identification, religiousness, syncretism, group narcissism and so on. These tribes do not limit themselves to teenage groupings as shown by the number of adult tribes where people gather around shared 'ordinary passions' (Bromberger, 1998). In fact, the common denominator of postmodern tribes is the community of emotion or passion. In addition, tribes are inherently unstable, small-scale, 'affectual'

(Maffesoli, 1996) and not fixed by any of the established parameters of modern society. Instead, they can be held together essentially through shared emotion and passion. A tribe is a question of sharing of passions, hobbies, interests, way of being, moral beliefs, with people who recognize themselves in the relationship. The tribe is built on the shared meaning of the sense given to different situations: a noun, an object, an emotion, a tangible experience are all pieces of the same idiosyncratic world - that belongs to the tribe, and whose members contribute in building it. In this way, any object can acquire a special meaning within the borderline of a tribe, and lose it outside them (Ripamonti et al., 2005). Thus, every behavior, even a gift exchange in a game, may acquire a special meaning within a tribe, contributing to the definition of the self-image *within* the tribe.

In addition, Scott Feld (1981) talks about the power of foci in understanding networks. You and your strong ties have things in common, the foci of the relationship. Often, the closer you are, the more you share in common. This is why you often have things in common with friends of friends. Now, each Facebook game has his focus. 'Selling and buying' friends in *Friends for sale*, farming in *Farmville* and *Farm Town*, growing pets in *Pet Society* and *PetVille*, and so on. The players of such games share the focus of the game exactly (there are lovers of *Farmville* that are haters of *Pet Society* and the other way round) and also share all the emotions and meanings linked to the game. As a matter of fact, in Facebook we assist in the rise of a group of tribes, one for each (more or less) widely used game.

In addition, the shared focus creates a boundary between insiders and outsiders (we players and the others). For example in Facebook there are many groups grouping people not playing Farmville. The most popular of them, *Not Playing Farmville* has 2,128,189 fans while the official *Farmville* Group has 19,677,974 fans. Another interesting example that underlines the *we* versus *the others* dichotomy is the spreading of a video called 'Farmville Ad'[2]. In reality this is a fake advert that is a parody teasing *Farmville* addicts. The video has 1,119,088 visualizations on YouTube only (data on this sharing on Facebook are not available).   Therefore, groups of tribes are created, as in other environments, because of the focus of the application and the shared sense of membership to the tribe (because of a shared meaning). However, we cannot forget that one of the levers that push the user to play is the presence of the shared environment with public actions, where *my* friends are. To summarize, the focus is the first lever that pushes the user to take part in the game of the tribe, and the presence of friends and all the mechanisms described in Sections 3 and 4 of this paper are the levers that push him to return to use the application.

5. TWO EXAMPLES FROM FACEBOOK CASUAL GAMES

After the above-mentioned theoretical considerations, this section will describe two examples that help to better understand the link between each element and how they affect the creation of ties and the emergence of tribes.

5.1 An example of public and private: identities, spaces and actions.

Pet Society (18,726,890 monthly active users) is basically an online version of Tamagotchi[3], where the player can take care of a virtual pet. While it's true that the game itself is Tamagotchi in style, it allows a very in depth characterization that makes the pet you create *your own* pet.

In fact, in Pet Society the pet starts 'naked'. However, the player can choose what he/she (you can decide whether it'll be male or female) looks like. He/she can pick the color of the pet, and parts like ears, eyebrows, eyes, nose, mouth and head shape (and even a little marking on his snout). Finally the player chooses his/her name. Once in the game, the player can also buy objects to personalize the pet: dresses, shirts, shoes and so on.

It's worth noting that while most Facebook games now allow for such an in depth characterization, *Pet Society* was the first game to allow for it.

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[2] http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=odBDAcOEKuI&annotation_id=annotation_321740&feature=iv
[3] The Tamagotchi is a handheld digital pet created in 1996 by Aki Maita and sold by Bandai. For further information: http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Tamagotchi

What makes the in depth characterization very interesting is linked to two main aspects: personal identification and immersion, and social presence. The first one is obtained through the pet's personalization elements. The last one is influenced by game design. In fact, one of the objectives of the game is to obtain (virtual) money visiting friends (in this way the player can buy, for example, clothes for the pet). It's not unusual to see a friend's message in a virtual house, commenting on the new look of the pet. In the end, the fact that the player's 'pet' is a special pet that is different from others becomes a topic for conversation. In the same way, the player can personalize the pet's home, buying and arranging things. As for the pet personalization, this means that the house the pet lives in is the player's home. And, as for the pet personalization, this means that when a player is visiting a friend's house, he/she will check out his latest arrangements and make comments on it, thus generating a social behavior.

To summarize, Pet Society shows an interesting blend of personal aspects and social aspects. Firstly, the player carves out a 'private' space personalizing his/her pet and home. Secondly, the presence of friends in the same 'space of play' creates a sense of social presence and collective action. Finally, the social aspect linked to the membership to a tribe goes beyond friendly chitchat. It is not unusual, in fact, to see discussions in forums about pets' appearances and room arrangements.

5.2 An example of 'tribe' membership: gift-giving in *Farmville*

Farmville is a real-time simulation game available as an application on Facebook and MySpace. The game allows players to manage a virtual farm by planting, growing and harvesting virtual crops, trees, and livestock. This is the most popular gaming application available on Facebook and, as said, is reported to have more than 76 million active users playing the game all over the world. The game 'plays' with the ties you already have in the social network: you can 'visit' your friends (i.e., the friends from your network who are already using the application), help them, and give them a virtual gift.

This last kind of behavior is not unusual in social network games. In reviewing 98 game applications with over 100,000 daily active users (DAU), Inside Social Games found that only about 20% of them did not have a gifts component at the start of the game (ISG, 2010). While gifts have often been considered social spam, in Facebook games the feature has become a very powerful way to get users to interact around a game.

However, the interesting part of the *Farmville* example is how the application developers used the power of ties in order to increase the number of 'hits' to the application (and the number of users) over Christmas 2009. *Farmville* developers did this by adding some particular, 'surprise' Christmas gift to the classical gift-giving feature (another usual type of behavior in social network games).

These gifts cannot be bought. The player has to receive them as gifts from his/her neighbors/ friends (so if he/she does not have enough friends, he/she will have to add some more) and place them under the 'Christmas Tree'. The more presents the user gets, the bigger the Christmas tree grows, and so on. To limit the gift giving, the players are only allowed to send a gift to their friends every 6 hours.

It's easy to foresee the resulting behavior generated by these premises knowing that one of the most common types of behavior in social software is to collect things (Porter, 2009). First of all, people put the 'sticker collection' behavior into effect (i.e., 'I want them all!'), so they go back to use the application every 6 hours. Now, let's remember that in this game the player can only send the gifts to others. What draws the user back every 6 hours is the expected reciprocation behavior (i.e., their friend will send a gift in return). Gift requests were also made on public walls. In this case the gift exchange allowed the users to feel like they were a part of a whole, a 'tribe' linked to a common practice: the gift exchange. In this way they created a kind of social identity. Moreover, the 'time' variable should not be underestimated. As Bromberger (Bromberger, 1998) said, time can be seen as 'collective time' under some circumstances. For example the time used for cooking pasta with friends is a collective time (with a bigger or smaller energy investment) that acts as a link with friends.

The place (a social network) and the particular moment (Christmas) determined a particular situation and thus a particular type of behavior[4]. This combination allowed the onset of a particular social identity ('the gift sender/receiver').

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[4] Note that the combination of place/moment is essential. *Pet Society* implemented a virtual 'Stickers album' but it is practically never used because it holds no additional meaning.

6. CONCLUSION AND FUTURE WORKS

This paper has shown that in the Facebook context playfulness is linked to the blending of personal and social aspects. In particular, playfulness is constructed through: (i) the engagement in 'fictional' social actions, (ii) the use of asynchronous actions, (iii) the combination of public and private actions within the game. The three above-mentioned aspects contribute to the emergence of particular social groupings, very similar to Cova's tribes. Consequently, the social ties created through the game and the interest in its foci encourages the user to return to use the application.

Note that the aim of this paper is not to state that only social aspects are determinants for the success of a game application in Facebook. Without a gameplay that appeals to the player's emotional sphere (raising a pet, being a gangster, and the like) no social aspects can catch on. On the other hand, the presence of friends who share the same 'emotional sphere' is a lever to push players to return to use the application. The playfulness, while attributable in part to the design, is heavily reliant upon users and their level of engagement. In the end, users themselves create playfulness. Facebook Applications are a prominent example of this phenomenon because they are used both as individual entertainment and as socialization tools.

After the analysis reported in this paper we can foresee two possible developments.

First of all, the three elements that cause the emergence of tribes are strongly supported by the environment the games are in: Facebook has a high level of visibility of actions because of the feed mechanism used in the wall. It would be very interesting to compare the same applications in other environments such as MySpace and Bebo which lack the social features that Facebook offers.

This will help to understand in which measure and in which way the different environments influence the emergence of the tribe linked to the game.

On the other hand, it could be very interesting to apply our findings developing a game for Facebook. To this purpose we will migrate a virtual world we constructed for educational purposes, School Society (http://www.lirmm.fr/~gouaich/schoolsociety/), re-designing it in order to foster sociability in the Facebook contest.

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